# AFTER THE BATTLE

# COLDITZ

Number 63

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**Editor-in-Chief: Winston G. Ramsey**
**Editor: Karel Margry**
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**Front Cover:** For nearly 1,000 years a castle has dominated the River Mulde at Colditz, a formidable obstacle to invaders of south-eastern Germany. During the Second World War, floodlit and ringed with barbed wire, its purpose was reversed: now it was to keep the enemies of the nation securely bottled up inside. (Reinhold Eggers via Michael Booker)

**Centre Pages:** This picture was taken by David Ray in 1974 when, except for the removal of the wire and floodlights, it could be seen almost unchanged from its wartime rôle. Now at peace, the castle has assumed a new purpose for healing the sick resulting in many parts being altered or refurbished.

**Rear Cover:** Most famous poem by the young 19-year-old John Gillespie Magee, who lost his life over Lincolnshire in December 1941. (Raymond D'Ancey)

**Acknowlegements:** Many people have assisted in the compilation of the feature on Colditz and the Editor is especially indebted to Pat Reid, Mike Moran, Kenneth Lockwood, Leo de Hartog, A. P. T. Luteyn Esq., A. L. C. Dufour Esq., Jacques Hageman and Pierre Mairesse Lebrun for their generous help. It could also not have been produced without the unstinted help of Michael Booker and David Ray, the leading British experts on the subject, or our researcher/photographer in Holland, Karel Margry. Tom Posch was invaluable in liaising with the East German authorities and arranging our visit. The 'Lange' photographs have been supplied to us from a variety of sources with special thanks to Ron Baybutt, author of *Camera in Colditz*, Malcolm Fisher of Regimentals, Michael Booker, and the late Reinhold Eggers.

Acknowlegements are also extended to the following authors and their publishers for permission to include extracts: the late Reinhold Eggers for quotations from *Colditz — The German Story* and *Colditz Recaptured* published by Robert Hale, London, and to the late Airey Neave for the extract from his book *Saturday at M.I.9* published by Hodder and Stoughton.

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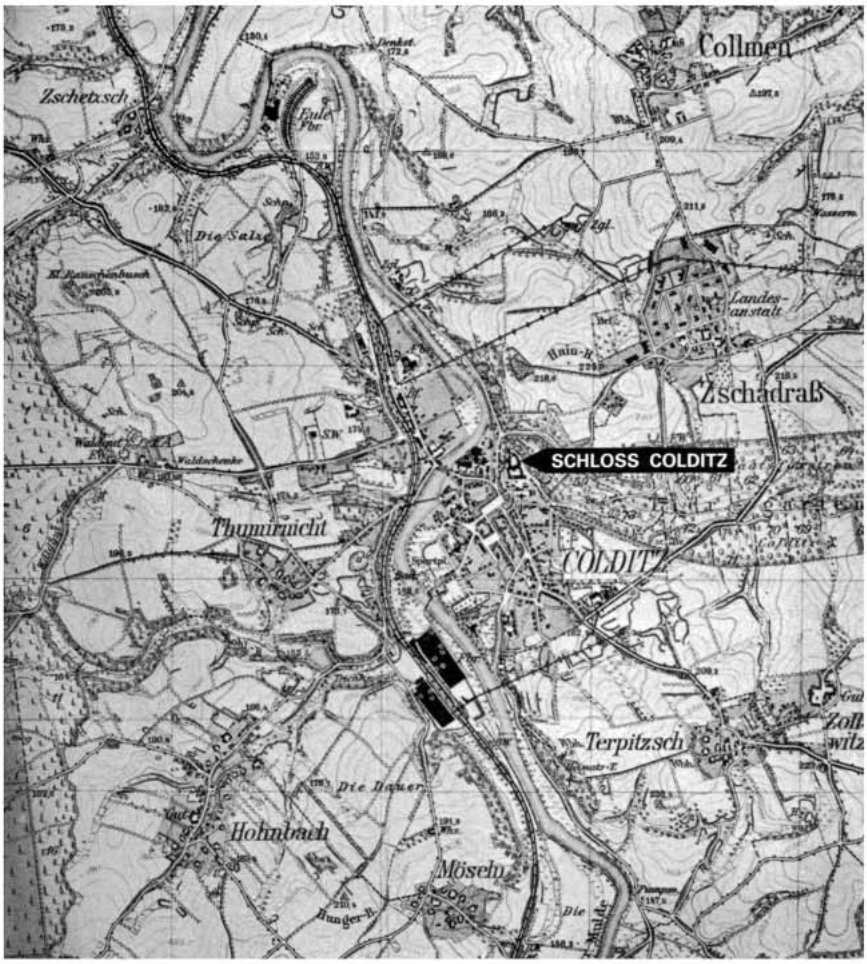
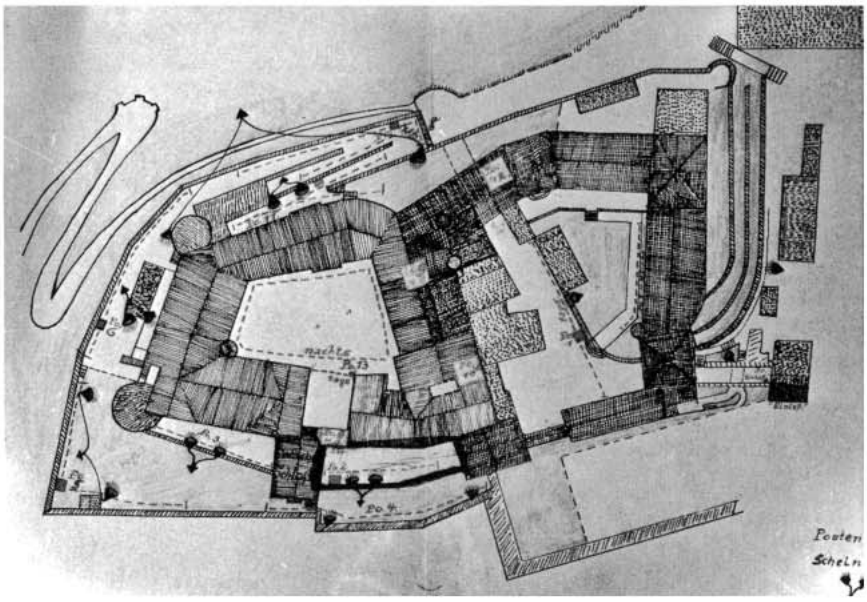
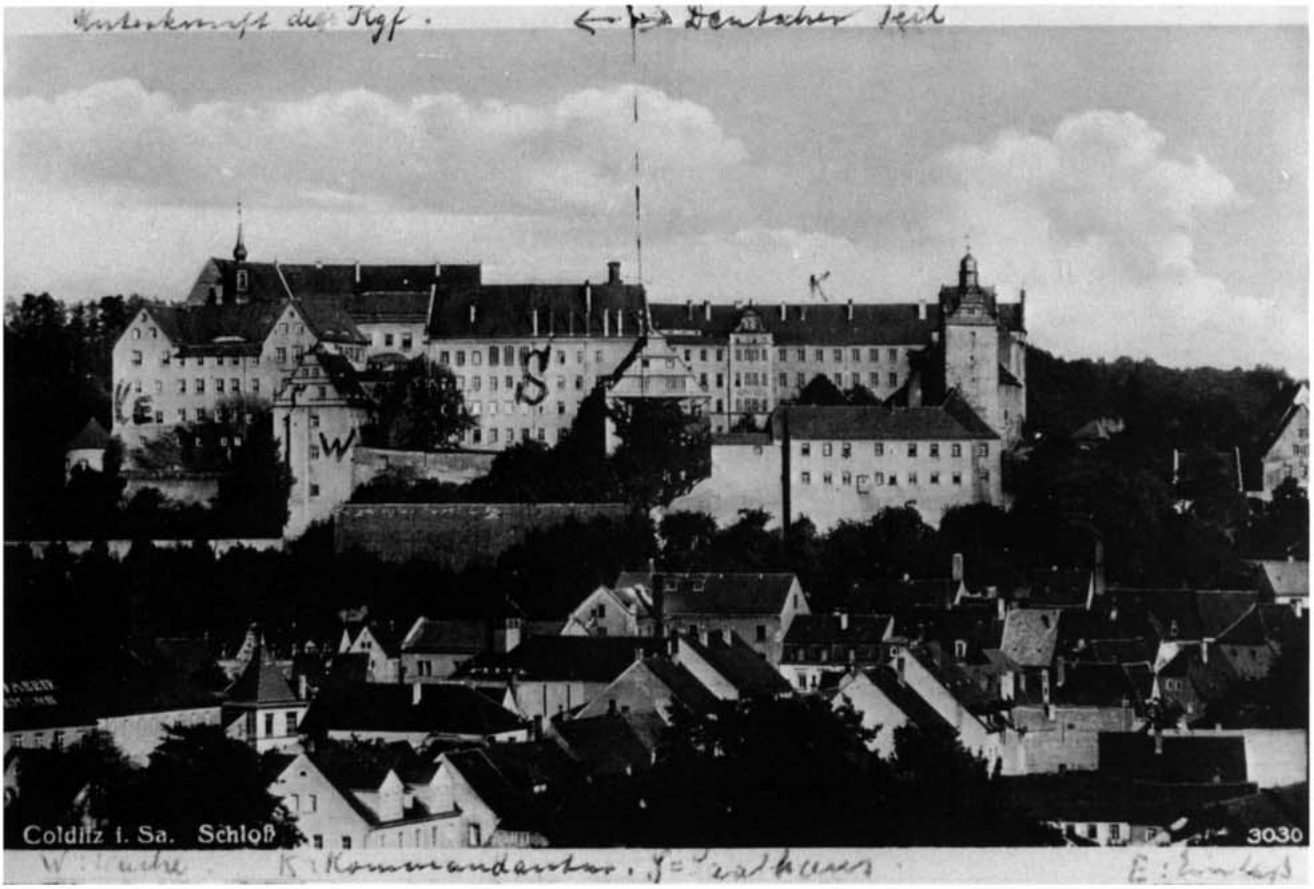



Fifty years ago, in October 1939, the Oberkommando der Wehrmacht took over Schloss Colditz for use as a prisoner-of-war camp. Ever since the National Socialist Party had come to power in 1933, the castle had served the regime in one form or another: first as an offshoot of the Buchenwald concentration camp complex, and more latterly as a Hitler Youth training centre. Now it was destined for a new rôle which was to project its reputation far beyond its six-year tenure by the OKW; through the written word, film and television right up to the present day.



*Top:* **Colditz and its immediate environs from the 1940 period.** *Above:* **German security plan of the Schloss, unfortunately undated, showing sentry posts and searchlight positions. Reproduced from a presentation album given by the late Reinhold Eggers to Douglas Bader by courtesy of Malcolm Fisher of Regimentals.**

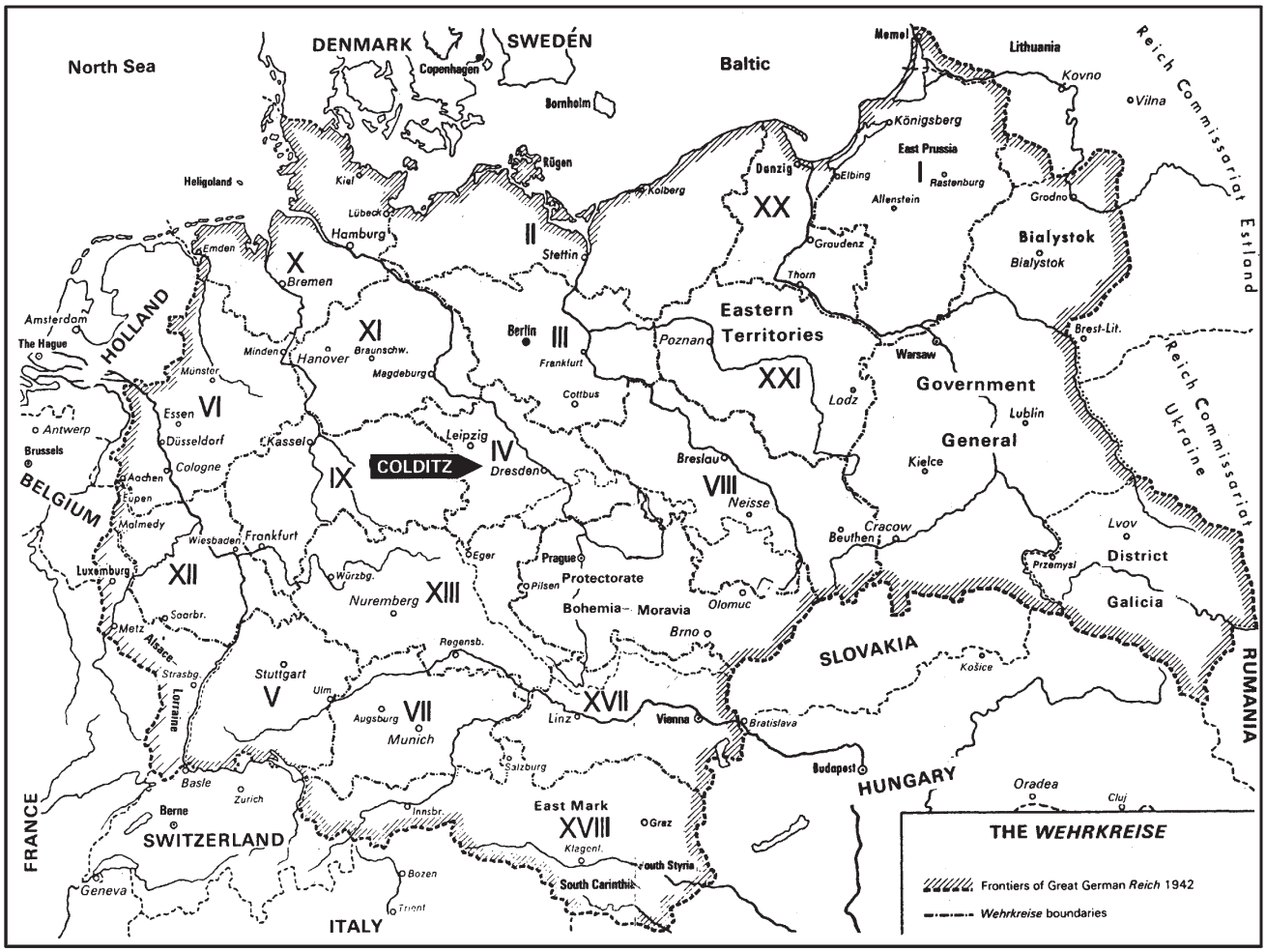



# COLDITZ

Colditz. Today the mere mention of the word conjures up the vision of the fortress prison, but in 1939 it meant nothing. If at all, the scholarly historian may have recalled the Schloss built on the eastern bank of the river Mulde (a tributary of the Elbe), between Leipzig and Dresden, as being the ancient seat of the Kings of Saxony.

The castle was no stranger to battle, the history books recalling it being subject to a variety of sieges and sackings, captures and recaptures, since it was established in 1014. From the early 19th century it had been used as a prison, later as a place of incarceration for the mentally insane. Hitler took it over in 1933 as a convenient place for the imprisonment of those who opposed his regime, and it was hurriedly pressed into service in 1939 as a transit camp for Polish officer prisoners-of-war. With the outbreak of war on the Western Front in May 1940 the Poles were replaced by Belgian and French officer prisoners. Later the Poles returned.

**Hauptmann Eggers was Lageroffizier at Colditz from November 1940 to February 1944 except for a three-month break in 1942. For the last 14 months of the war he served as Security Officer, building up a mass of historical material which he managed to retain after the war was over. Until his death in 1974 he was the prime source of German material on Colditz and its escapers.** *Top:* **This pre-war view of the west face of the castle bears his personal annotations indicating the vulnerable 'seam' between the administrative and prisoners' wings.** *Right:* **On the Allied side, Major Pat Reid (left) became the leading British historian on Colditz, authoring several books and acting as technical adviser to both Ivan Foxwell's film in 1954 and the 1970s television series. Here he is seen with actor David McCallum in 1972 revisiting the castle for the first time since his escape thirty years before.**




**The military districts of Greater Germany. Colditz came under the jurisdiction of Army Corps Area IV. (Reproduced from The History of the German Resistance 1933–1945 by Peter Hoffmann with acknowledgement to Macdonald and Janes.)**

Stammlager camps (shortened to Stalag) for PoW other ranks, and Offizierslager for officer prisoners-of-war with the abbreviation Oflag, had already been established by the Oberkommando der Wehrmacht (OKW) for their detention. Each Army Corps was responsible for the camps in its area, Colditz falling within the zone of Army Corps Area IV — Dresden. The complete breakdown of camps in Area IV is shown in the table. However, Colditz had the unique rôle of having been designated a Sonderlager, or special camp, which was to be used only for those officer prisoners who were, or had shown themselves to be, a high security risk.

At first sight the idea undoubtedly had

**ARMY CORPS AREA IV — DRESDEN — MAY 1945**
Compiled by Michael Booker

Oflag IVA – Hohenstein (Bad-Schandau)
IVB – Königstein (Sachs. Schweiz)
Formed 14.10.39
81 with 67 ORs for General Staff Officers only
IVC – Colditz/Sachsen
Formed 30.10.39
254 with 71 ORs (British)
IVD – Elsterhorst by Hoyerswerda
Formed 5.6.40
5,464 with 551 ORs
(54) IVE – Annaberg
Stalag IVA – Hoyerswerda 26.8.39
Elsterhorst 10.9.39
Hohenstein über Bad-Schandau
Formed 1.2.41
42,521 with 1,029 officers (4,546 British)
IVB – Mühlberg (Elbe) 2 coal mines
Formed 29.9.40
25,052 with 1,310 officers (7,792 British)
IVC – Wistritz by Teplitz-Schönau
43,449 with 661 officers (6,486 British)
IVD – Neuburgdorf 5.8.40
Falkenberg b. Ricsa 1941
Torgau (Elbe) 1942–1944
43,703 with 558 officers (10,303 British)
IVD/Z – Annaberg
IVE – Altenburg (Thüringen)
Re-named Stalag 384 1.6.42
IVF – Hartmannsdorf, Post Burgstadt/Sachsen, with branch camp at Altenburg
Formed 1.2.41
47,083 with 927 officers (5,191 British)
IVG – Oschatz/Sachsen
34,795 with 340 officers (4,168 British)
Formed 1.2.41
IVH – Zeilhain with branch camp at Mühlberg
Formed 1.12.41 to 1.10.42 then Stalag 304 until 1944

(Notes — Stalag IVA had work camps at Geube Brigitta, Ostfeld, Erika, Heye 111 Wedmitz
Stalag IVC had work camp at Schwaz 11)

Hospitals 1 – Königswarthe
2 – Elsterhorst
3 – Schwurzkolim
4 – Schmorkau
5 – Bilin
6 – Annaberg
7 – Weinberg
8 – Hohenstein
9 – Reichenbach
10 – Wurzen
11 – Leipzig
Nr. 735 – Mühlberg

Military Prison – 1. Zwickau 2. Halle/Saale

**Most prisoners arrived at Colditz by train. Here Hauptmann Hans Lange (sixth from left), Security Officer from 1939 to October 1943, discusses with the Kommandant, Oberst Max Schmidt, the arrival of Belgian prisoners in 1940 before Colditz became a Sonderlager. This picture was not taken at the public station but on the opposite side of the railway yard about 100 yards down the track.**

**The train originally stood on a shunting line removed after the war. Karel Margry, our researcher in Colditz, took this comparison a little further back to show an existing track — the station is out of the picture to the left.**

some appeal to the German military, suddenly faced with the problem of keeping large numbers of the enemy out of circulation behind their lines. Unlike Britain, Germany did not have the advantage of being able to ship its prisoners overseas, and the borders of neutral Spain, Sweden and Switzerland appeared tempting goals for those prisoners who felt it their duty to try to escape. Undoubtedly many prisoners were content to sit out the war, but for those who persisted in their attempts, a central high-security, escape-proof prison where such offenders could be safely locked away, looked attractive.

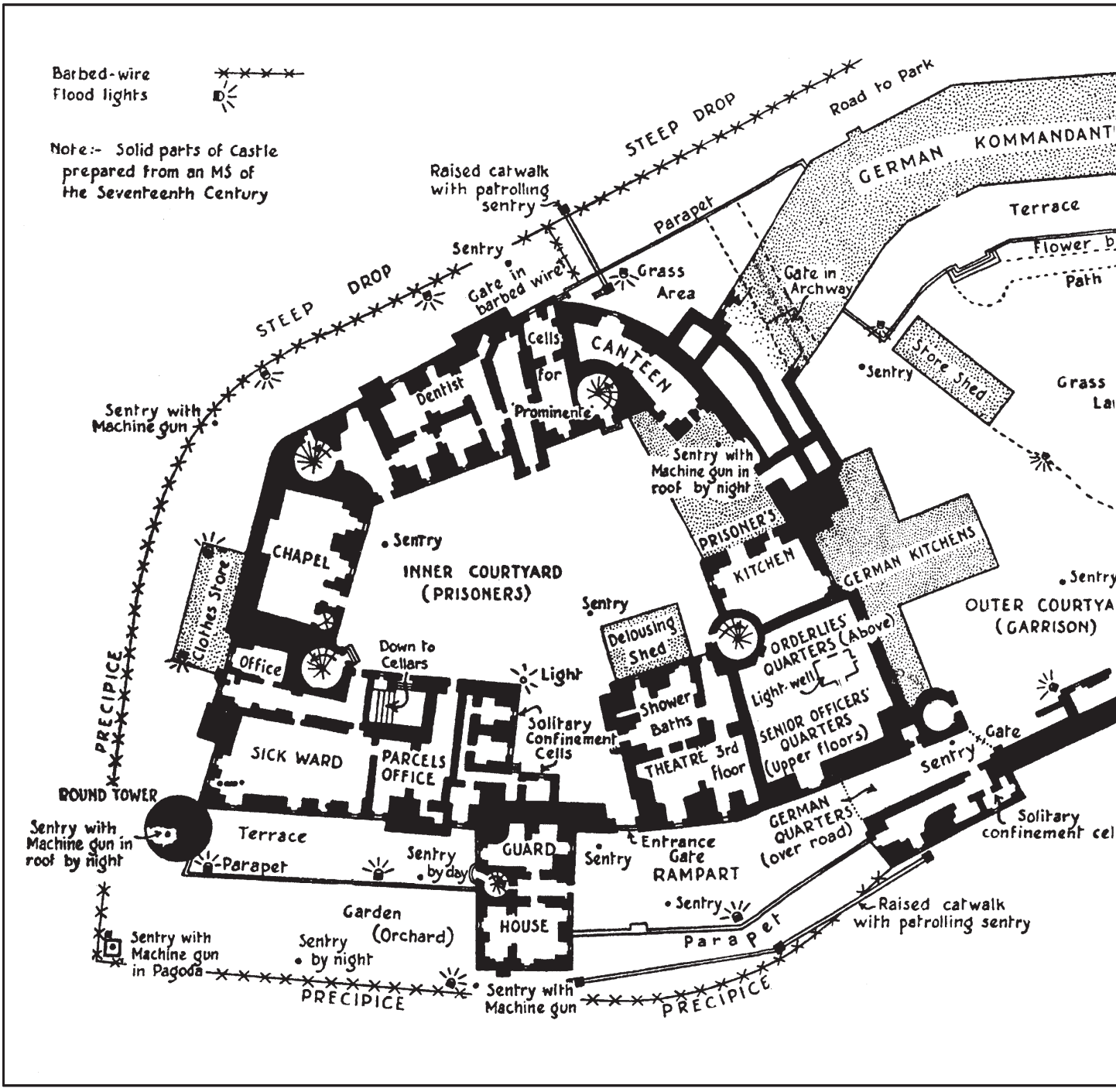
Colditz, the mediaeval fortress, appeared the ideal answer. Massive walls with sheer drops or steep terraces all round gave the castle the appearance of being impregnable — which it probably was from the *outside*. It does not seem to have dawned on the authorities that castles were built with the intention of being able to repel invaders, and are not necessarily proof against keeping people in!

Nowadays prison authorities adopt a dispersal policy for certain classes of prisoner; in those days, the idea of concentrating the best escaping brains of several nations all together under one roof was a recipe for disaster.

Captain (later Major) Pat Reid, whose books on Colditz first captured the public imagination in the early 1950s, has claimed that British escape successes where the escaper actually reached home ground — dubbed 'home runs' — totalled an amazing 50 per cent of all those getting clear of the camp — a record unequalled by any of the ordinary PoW camps in Germany. Likewise, the German security officer at Colditz, Hauptmann Reinhold Eggers, has said that 'a more unsuitable place to hold prisoners will probably never again be chosen'.

Hauptmann Eggers lists a total of 19 prisoners who escaped (i.e. made 'home runs') whilst under the jurisdiction of Oflag IVC personnel. Pat Reid's claims (listed in his latest book *Colditz The Full Story* published in 1984) are different because he includes inmates who escaped from places other than Colditz — like Squadron Leader Brian Paddon while away from the castle facing a court-martial, or the two ERAs, Wally Hammond and Tubby Lister, who spent a brief period at Colditz before being sent to an 'other ranks' camp from which they later gained their freedom.

Unfortunately, because Pat Reid published his accounts first (in *The Colditz Story*, 1952, and *The Latter Days*, 1953), the 'mystery' aspect of how the seemingly impossible had been achieved was lost. Reinhold Eggers admitted in his book *Colditz The German Story* that for 10 years the means by which some of the escapes had been carried out were still unknown to him. Had Eggers published his account first, instead of in 1961, Pat Reid and others would have then had the marvellous opportunity of revealing to us all just how it had been done. We cannot put the clock back but perhaps we can try to recreate the way it might have happened.




'The OKW', explained Eggers in 1961, 'decided in 1940 to set up a special camp with strict surveillance of the inmates as permitted under Article 48 of the Geneva Convention, though without loss of any other prisoners' rights as provided by this agreement. In effect, this camp had a greater number of searches, roll-calls and so on than in normal camps, and much less room to move around in — just a forty-yards-square courtyard, and no open space except the park outside, which might only be visited for short and fixed periods daily under some restriction and much surveillance.

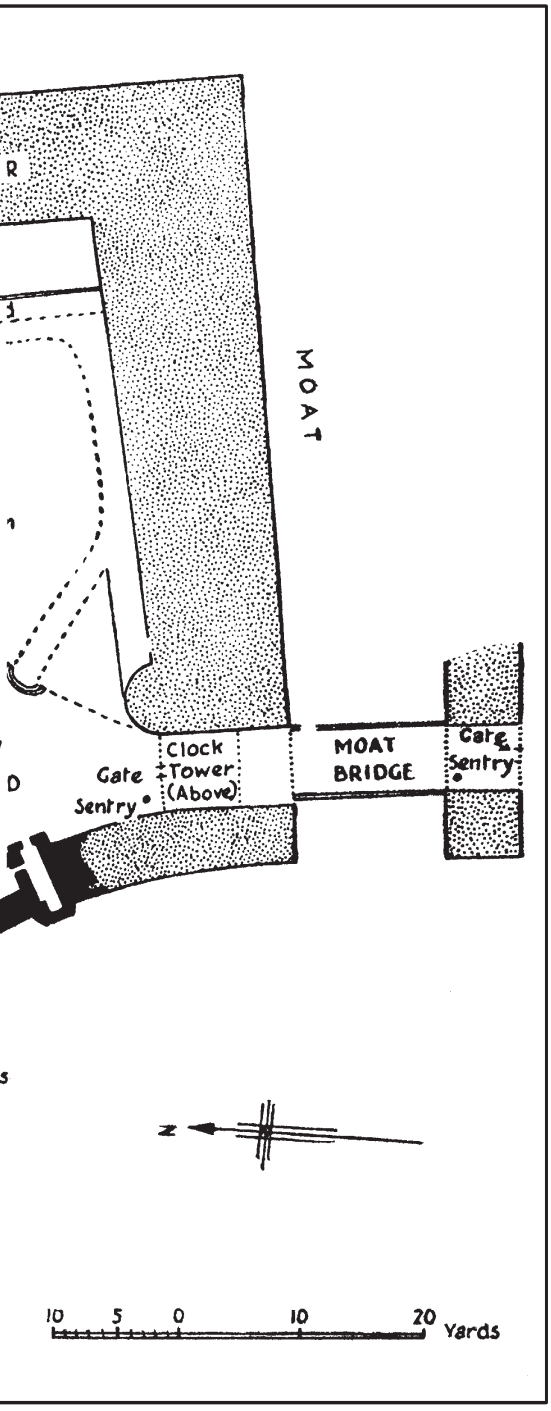
'The German administrative buildings were in the newer eighteenth-century yard, comprising Kommandantur offices, store-rooms and so on. There were two ways into the German yard, one through the main gate and one from the park side. There was only one gateway into the prisoners' yard, with the guardroom adjacent. Access between the two yards was out of the north-west corner of our yard under what was known as the archway up along an approach yard to the guardroom and there sharp right through a door in a large double gate, to what I have called throughout the prisoners' yard, as opposed to the German yard. In both yards the buildings ran up three floors high with double attics above them. All round the entire castle the ground fell away in terraces, on the west towards the town and on the north and east sides down towards the park.

'The south side of the prisoners' yard was the north side of ours. We occupied the ground floors on our side — they had kitchens and so on, on theirs. But this stretch of building was only as it were one room thick above the ground floor. The rooms were all in our occupation — but at the south-east corner the prisoners' rooms backed on to ours, and at the other end of this "seam" the Saalhaus rooms, which housed the Allied senior officers, overlooked the German yard. The prisoners repeatedly exploited these points of junction and overlap for their own purposes — escape.'

The first German Commandant was Oberst Schmidt who was replaced by Oberst Glaesche in August 1942 followed by Oberst Prawitt in February 1943. Hauptmann Hans Lange was security officer, followed by Major Dr Hans Horn and then Hauptmann Eggers from February 1944. Prior to that Eggers was Lageroffizier together with Hauptmann Paul Priem and Hans Püpcke.

The first British prisoners to reach Colditz on November 5, 1940 were three Canadian RAF officers, Flying Officers Donald Middleton, Keith Milne and Howard D. Wardle, one of the earliest PoWs who had been shot down over Germany in April 1940. All three had already an escape attempt to their credit in August 1940 — possibly one of the earliest escapes from the regular camps.

They were joined on November 7 by six Army officers who had been recaptured after escaping from a camp at Laufen in Munich



**The most vulnerable part of the journey, as far as the Germans were concerned, came after the prisoners left the station, for the railway lay over on the western side of the town. The prisoners had to be marched over the Mulde river bridge *(above)* and through the streets to the castle, giving an audacious captive the chance of making a last break for freedom.**

Army Corps Area VII: 2nd Lieutenant Peter Allen, Cameron Highlanders; Captain Rupert Barry, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry; Captain Harry Elliott, Irish Guards; Captain Richard Howe, Royal Tank Regiment; Captain Kenneth Lockwood, Queen's Royal Regiment; and Captain Patrick Reid, RASC. Being one of the first arrivals, Pat Reid was therefore in an ideal position to become in later years the unofficial post-war historian for the Colditz escapers.

'As my leave was over the New Year,' wrote Hauptmann Eggers after the war, 'I was on duty for this, my first Christmas among prisoners. I was interested to see how they would spend it. The French and Poles, of course, had long established letter and parcel-post contact with home. The British channels were still rather unorganised, but their first food parcels arrived at the beginning of December, from the British Red Cross. There was no shortage of food in the prisoners' yard that Christmas or in our German yard adjoining. There was wine and beer in both — though we rationed this among the prisoners and gave them no strong drink at all.

'Entertainment was provided by the Poles. They put on a magnificent marionette show with musical accompaniments and a translated commentary. "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" was the main piece.

'I think the Polish officers were top in "morale" at the end of that year 1940, although they had been in our hands for over fifteen months. The French were still solemn after their defeat. The British were digging themselves in, so I thought. Under the canteen floor, had we but known it, and not digging themselves in, but digging themselves out! It wasn't only to their national success that they were drinking on Boxing Day — in one bottle of wine between three — from that very canteen. It was a local victory they were hoping for, also from the canteen where they had started a tunnel, by then well under way.

'We had our own Christmas celebration in the Waldschänke, the inn in the forest. We all had a pound of real coffee beans in our extra rations, the last of it I saw for years. So quiet was Oflag IVC that I remember nothing of equal importance that Christmas!

'After I got back from leave, Russian officer prisoners quartered in the town celebrated their Orthodox Christmas on January 11th. Their Pope, or priest, came from Dresden, where there had been a White Russian community for years. . . . It was not long before I had to bring my nose rapidly down to earth, and on to the escape trails that I was to follow from then on for the next four years without a moment's break.

'We held security conferences whenever an escape took place and at least every week as a matter of routine. Practically every routine occasion was an escape occasion, and one way and another every escape was an

As can be seen from the plan, the castle was constructed around two enclosed courtyards. The southern courtyard, through which prisoners had to pass to reach the inner yard, was flanked by the Kommandantur, but the guardhouse *above*, on the western side, was the nerve centre. The arched entrance to the prisoners' courtyard lies on the right. *Right:* Today Colditz is a hospital and the old guardhouse is a children's ward. Note the attic windows have been removed.

The guardroom in the ground floor, pictured here by the official Colditz photographers Moritz and Johannes Lange, father and son, who ran a shop in the town. From the blackboard inscription on the left, it appears that the duty officer on this particular day was Hauptmann Hans Püpcke, Lageroffizier from March 1941 to April 1945. The brass discs on the board were issued to every civilian workman or sentry entering the prisoners' yard, the number being logged in a record book. This entry was then checked off as the person left. Unaware of this system, in July 1941, two prisoners attempted to leave their courtyard disguised as painters but were rumbled by not being able to hand in a disc. A few days later, assuming that the disc check only applied to civilians, two Dutchmen disguised as German workers tried the same dodge but were also stopped. By now the prisoners realised the importance of the brass discs and set out to obtain one from one of the painters. What a pity we cannot see if No. 26 is missing from the board. It would be used later as we shall see.

*Left:* **The prisoners' yard was no more than forty yards square, encircled by tall buildings which cast deep shadows. Most sought-after spot was the seat in the sunshine in front of the south-facing chapel.** *Right:* **Today the courtyard is dominated by a weeping willow planted after the war. In the corner lies the clock tower which features later in a major French escape bid.**

occasion in itself. In fact I claim some honour for having been part of a team, a very amateur team I admit, of a German "holding" force whose clumsy efforts were nonetheless so successful that the experts had to lay on absolute masterpieces of escape to beat us.

'The stage for this battle between the two security systems, German and Allied, was in some way set to the advantage of the prisoners. The PoWs were, first of all, experienced in the job. In addition, our hands were somewhat tied by our not very practical superiors at Army Command HQ in Dresden and, above them, in Berlin. We made things better for the prisoners by cramming Colditz with new escape material week after week. Each new arrival brought with him knowledge of new methods of escape, acquaintance with fresh routes, knowledge of extra documents required, checks likely to be made at railway junctions and on trains, and so on. In this castle, the prisoners had the interior lines of communication and the initiative as well. Our effectives, real effectives, were hardly a dozen, while their team ran into hundreds.

'If, as a result of an escape or an attempt to escape, we altered our arrangements or introduced some new plan, they would catch on quicker than our own people who had, after all, other things to think about than

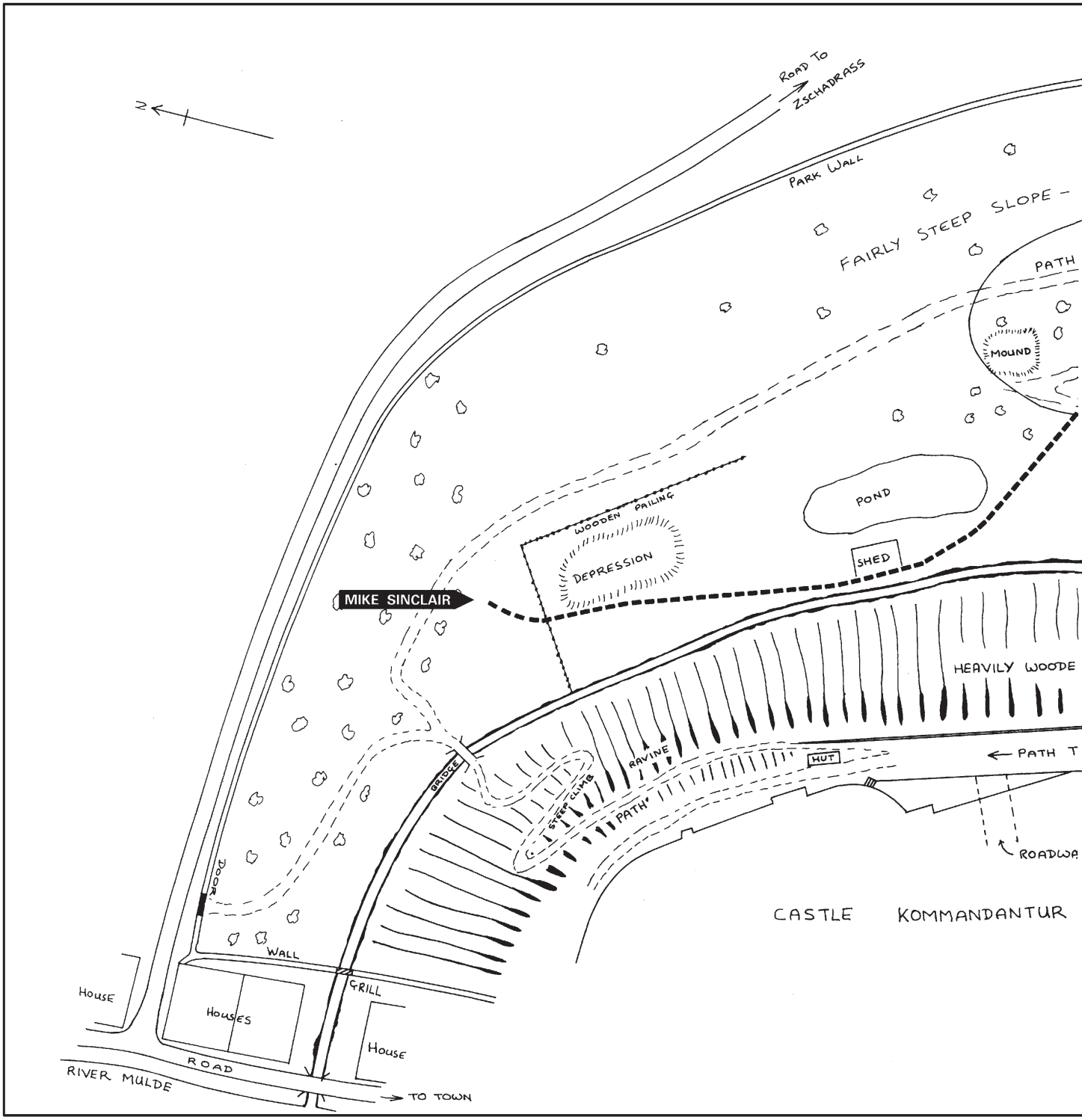
**From a photographer's point of view also, both the lighting and the chapel backdrop were ideal, and the seat was frequently used by Lange to pose his formal groups. Here RAF officers are pictured with their mentor, the disabled Wing Commander Douglas Bader, shot down over France and captured in August 1941 and sent to Colditz a year later as a persistent escaper.**

their hours of duty up at the castle. Most of the prisoners were "on duty" the whole time; they had no other life.

'Another major security difficulty concerned our regular camp staff, particularly NCOs. The longer these stayed in the castle, the better they got to know the prisoners and their methods. But they became all the more subject to bribery with cigarettes, chocolate or coffee, and to the softening effect of familiarity and simple politeness between themselves and the prisoners. Another weakness was the disadvantage that any German of lower rank feels in dealing with officers, of whatever nationality. And if we replaced these NCOs it took the new arrivals months to learn the tricks of the trade, during which time the prisoners took full advantage of their ignorance.'

In February 1941, 200 French officers arrived at Colditz, followed in July by 65 Dutch officers. At this time, Reinhold Eggers was Lageroffizier 3 (LO3), the third of the four Duty Officers responsible for daily contact with prisoners, the holding of parades or the carrying out of searches.

On March 18 two Frenchmen were found at the bottom of a hole they had dug below the clock tower where they had fixed up a hoist to haul the rubble up to the attics. Hauptmann Lange ordered the doorways on each of the three floors of the tower to be bricked up. That same month two Polish officers were caught cutting the bars to the window to the British canteen in the south-east corner of the exercise yard. The security staff were already suspicious of the canteen building as a guard had reported movement in that corner one night and they had

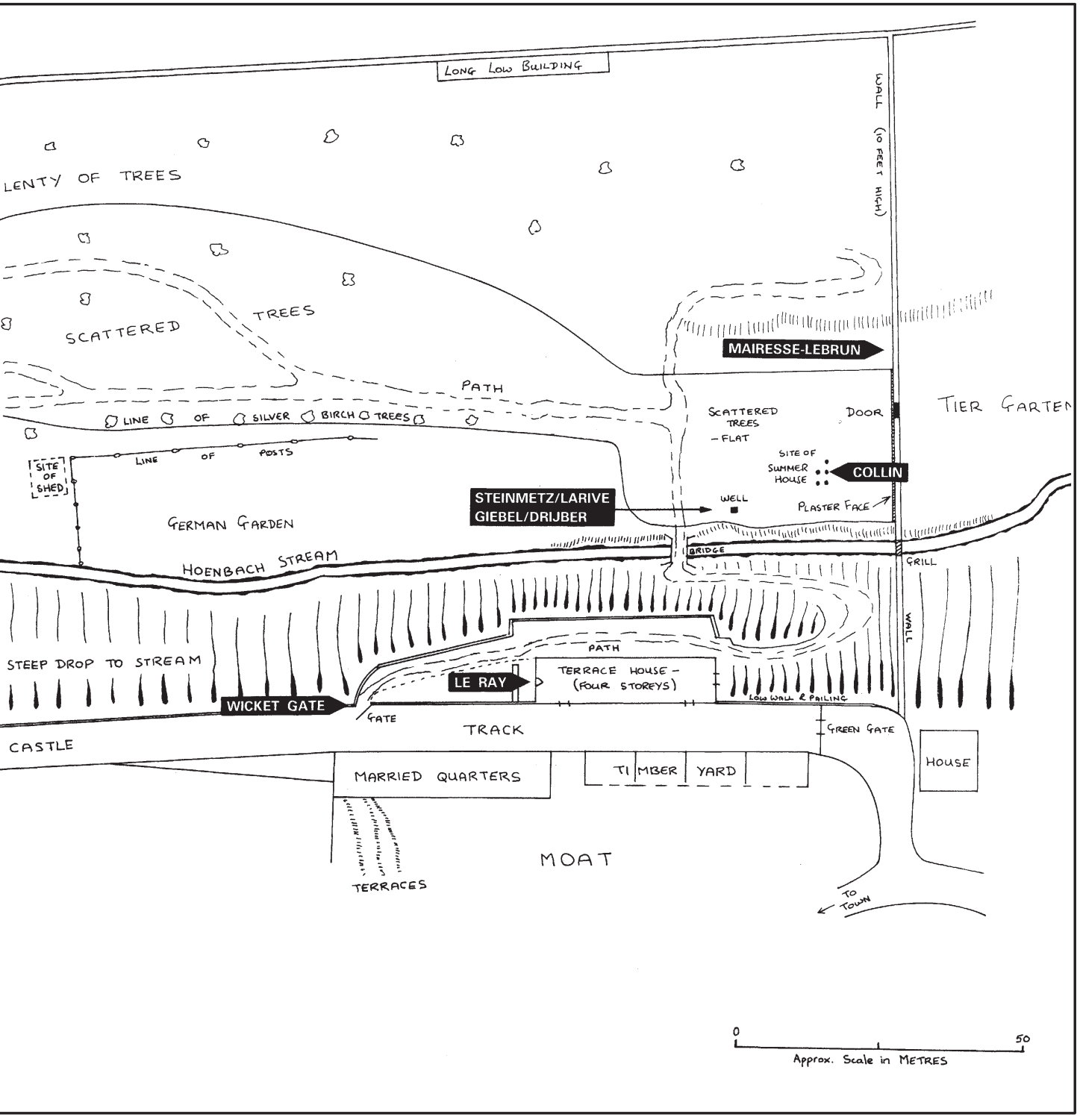



**Although the courtyard provided access to the fresh air and exercise stipulated for prisoners by the Geneva Convention, one concession — later established by the OKW as a right — was a voluntary daily two-hour exercise period in the nearby wooded park. There an enclosure, some 50 yards by 200, had been fenced off within the boundary wall proper — a solid stone structure some ten feet high. We are indebted to David Ray for his permission to reproduce this plan, based on much research and on-the-spot investigation. The level area at the southern end, surrounded by a wooden palisade fence and**

consequently put an extra padlock on the door. Eggers said that they lifted up a manhole in the floor inside and examined the drain underneath which was already bricked up, and cemented the cover back in place.

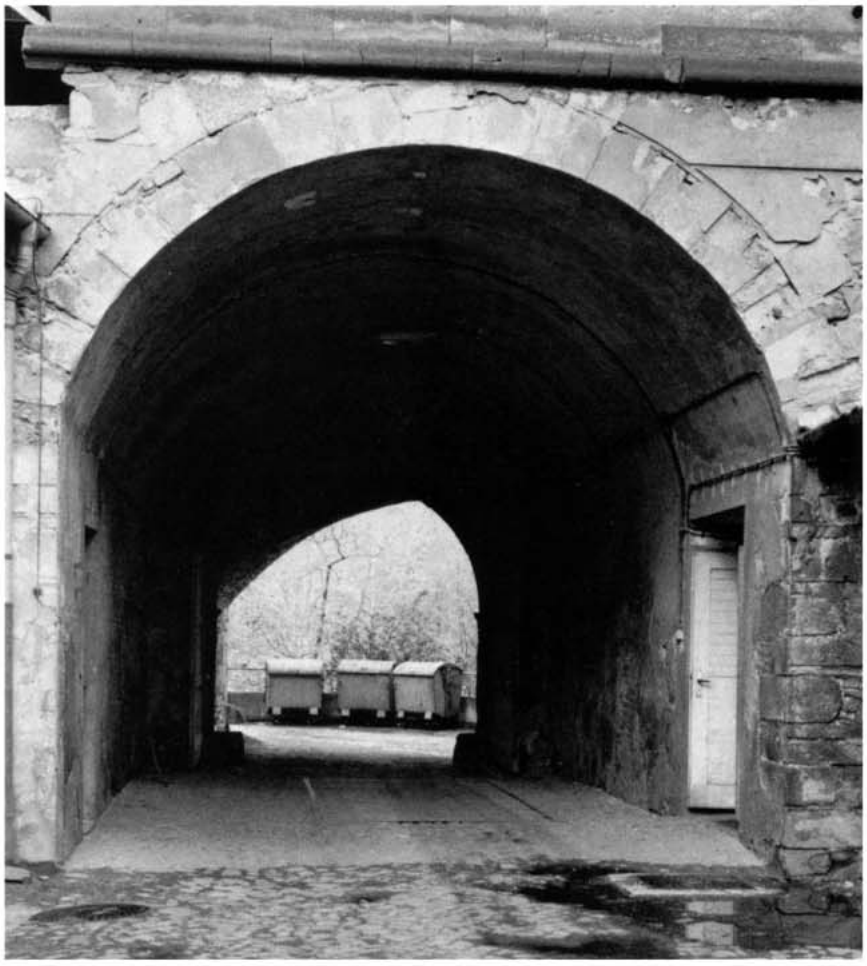
The first successful escape took place on April 11:

'After the afternoon parade,' wrote Eggers, 'a French officer was missing. We checked the faces of the whole camp with their identity cards — a long and difficult business. The photos on these were a year old at least. Many officers wore beards now, or just moustaches then. They were not all easily recognizable. At last we got to the capital "Ls", and Lieutenant Le Ray was the one who was not there. LO1 made his report — even he could find nothing amusing to say about the *Dicke Zigarre* (thick cigar) or "rocket", which he got from the Kommandant. Generalkommando Dresden came into the affair. Their Abwehrstelle 4 (Security 4) asked, "When did the prisoner escape, how did he get out, what clothes did he wear?" We didn't know. We gave the Leipzig police a description, and said that as the man was French he would probably go south-west. The OKW in Berlin wanted to know: "How did the officer escape? Who was responsible, had he been punished — how? What had we done to stop similar escapes in future?" We couldn't answer all of this. LO1 was in sore disgrace. We assumed that Le Ray had climbed up on the roof and down a lightning conductor on the outer walls of the building, out of sight of the sentries somewhere. We wired up parts of the roof and the chimneys. We rigged up more and stronger searchlights.'




**dubbed the 'sheep pen', was used for football although there were trees at intervals. Although the walk to and from the park was closely guarded, it was still seen as providing the best opportunity for escaping. In fact all the successful breaks from Colditz during 1941 took place while outside the castle walls, seven out of the ten home runs being initiated in the park exercise period. The locations of the successful park escapes are indicated and also the most tragic bid of all — the near-suicidal attempt by Lieutenant Mike Sinclair in 1944 which ended in his death.**

**The art of the successful escape was to cover up the absence for as long as possible to give the escaper every chance of clearing the immediate locality. At first, prisoners for the exercise walk were counted as they left their courtyard, after which they passed through this tunnel beneath the eastern part of the Kommandantur. They were counted again in the park but later additional checks were instituted.**



One can well picture the quandary in which the German guards found themselves in trying to establish how Le Ray had managed to get away. Nowhere was any trace found of sawn bars, opened doors, or any visible breaches from the castle. It was just as if the Frenchman had disappeared into thin air.

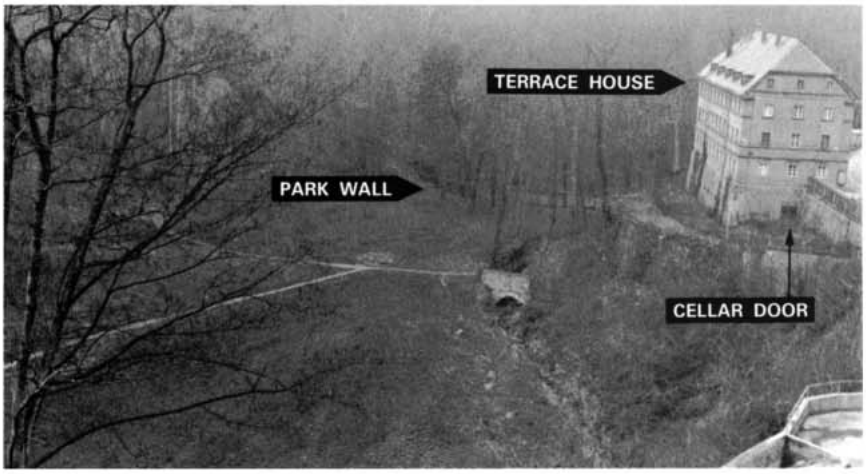
In 1973 ex-General Inspector of Territorial Defence Alain Le Ray explained to Eggers how he had done it:

'I planned to escape through the park, telling no one until the day of my attempt,' wrote Le Ray. 'In the meantime, I manufactured a new civilian suit. . . . I chose Easter to execute my plan to escape on the park walk, for my observations of the route down from the castle showed that when we left the castle gate on the way to the park, we went down a small path past a big house known as the Terrace House. At the corner of this building, where there was a door, the path curved slightly. One day I noticed that the door was half-open. Now the curve in the path by the corner of the Terrace House was of tremendous importance as I realised that if the marching column were to close in to the house, there was a moment, as a result of the curve, when the accompanying guards could not observe all the park-walkers at once. . . .

'I wore my uniform, but only for appearances as my white stockings were covered by

**In Le Ray's case on April 11, by staging a fight at the right moment on the return journey, the prisoners managed to fudge the count, which was not as rigorous at that stage, and the missing Frenchman was not noticed until the Appell was held back inside the castle. Thus the Germans were none the wiser as to exactly how he had got away and the park walk was safe for the time being.** *Above left:* **After emerging from the tunnel under the Kommandantur, seen in the distance, the prisoners would turn right and march towards the camera position. The guards' married quarters stand on the left.** *Above right:* **Walter Teichmann (left), the former Finance Director of the hospital, was our official guide during our two visits to Colditz. Here he pauses with Tom Posch beside the small gate on the right which leads on down to the park. Picture by Karel Margry.**

**Lieutenant Alain Le Ray photographed following his capture in 1940. Having already one near-successful escape to his credit from Oflag IID, he found himself in Colditz but not for long. The castle held him for just 46 days, thus earning him the record, not only for the first successful home run, but for escaping in the shortest time from arrival until Stephens beat him by 5 days in November 1942. After his escape he continued the war as a member of the Resistance and retired as Général de Corps in 1968.**




**In his account, the Général explains how his thoughts of escape centred on the park walk and in particular the Terrace House. This picture taken in 1985 by David Ray (no relation but, coincidentally, a master in School House at Rugby School attended by John Magee — see page 43) shows the proximity of the park to the castle and how it was easily overlooked by guards stationed above.**

blue trousers which reached to my shoes and my light cardigan was hidden under a thick chestnut-brown pullover. On top, I wore a wide khaki greatcoat to cover my small parcel of baggage, which, though concealed, made me look a little fatter than usual. Three of my friends had been let into my secret, together with our doctor (I had to ask him how to insert my creeper — a tube filled with money — into my alimentary canal).

'Now the Germans had opened the wicket gate and we began to pass through, one at a time, while we were counted twice. As I went through the wicket, my luggage was not noticed by the guard commander in charge of the walk, a sergeant with a scarred face who counted us automatically. As with all professional jailers, he could count prisoners and be quite certain his figures were correct, even though his mind could be on other things. On the other side of the gate, we were counted for the second time. These mechanical precautions did not alarm me in the least, as I knew it would not be too difficult to confuse such an arbitrary count, should there be a prisoner short. . . .

'Soon we reached the barbed-wire enclosure in the park, where we spent the next hour or so walking around. When it was time to go, we formed a column, were counted and began the march back. I was resolved to make my attempt before we reached the castle, if I possibly could.

'I threw my coat over my back and marched on the left side of the column with my friend Tournon beside me. . . .

'My heart was beating as if it would break. Tournon grabbed my coat; then with a single jump I reached the grass slope and fell. Was all lost? Would I be shot? I was on all fours and almost in despair, but I got up again and with two more jumps I reached the darkness beyond the little door. For some seconds my universe was upside down. Little by little my awareness returned.

'Where was I? In a vaulted cellar stored with beds and straw mattresses. I had scarcely time to grasp where I was, before I knew I had to get out and get away before the next count would reveal my absence. Then it would take only two minutes before the guards would be on my heels. . . . Now I had to get out to the walls of the park. . . . I went back down the path, with nerves strained to the utmost. There in the park were three Germans playing football inside the barbed wire enclosure. There was nothing for me to do but return to my cellar hiding place. . . .

'Time passed without any alarm being raised, so Tournon had succeeded [in causing a diversion at the count to delay the discovery of the absence of a prisoner]. Then I saw three German officers pass the cellar with an Alsatian dog. Time was going and I felt I had to get out of the cellar at any price. All was clear outside, so I departed; my rubber-soled shoes made no noise.

'For the second time I went quietly down to the park. There was no one there now, but eyes might be watching me from the windows of the Terrace House where a watcher could have followed my every step. . . . The whole park was like an immense eye watching me as I went along the barbed wire fence, to where it joined the wall, and grasped the upper strands of wire, putting my foot on the end of one of the wooden wire supports fastened to the wall. I stretched out my hands despairingly, until they felt the round top of the wall. . . . With a tremendous effort I succeeded in swinging myself to the top of the wall and down the other side, out of the castle grounds.'

**As the column wound its way up the path on its return, Le Ray made a jump for this doorway to the cellar of the Terrace House. He managed to get inside without being spotted and from there he later returned to the park and scaled the stone wall where the wire made it easier to climb. He reached Nuremberg by train where he robbed a civilian of his coat and money — a rare event of violence as escapers usually preferred to keep a low profile and not risk a brush with local police. He crossed into Switzerland four days later.**

**The rough stone inside the fence had been rendered with cement to a smooth finish to eliminate any handholds but outside it still remained climbable. Le Ray got over here close to where the brook runs under the wall through a grille.**

**Had he been caught, Le Ray would probably have faced a court-martial which was permissible under Article 50 of the Geneva Convention for acts of wounding or murder committed while escaping. All lesser crimes would normally fall under Article 54 which set a limit for disciplinary punishment of 30 days' imprisonment. In Army Corps Area IV, a prison camp Kommandant was permitted to award sentences of up to 14 days; longer periods of solitary confinement had to be referred to HQ at Dresden for approval. At Colditz the four solitary confinement cells stood in the corner of the prisoners' yard to the right of the main gate. The windows were barred and painted over, three facing the yard and one overlooking the west terrace. When we took this picture in May 1988, the windows of the cells still retained their bars. On the left can be seen the base where the delousing shed once stood. When the cells were full, a waiting list had to be drawn up of prisoners awaiting detention.**

The loss of a prisoner was made even worse because the precise method of escape was unknown. At the same time the surplus stocks of equipment stored in the unused parts of the castle began disappearing, which made it obvious that the prisoners had already achieved the means to pass through sealed doors, even those protected with Zeiss Ikon four-way security locks.

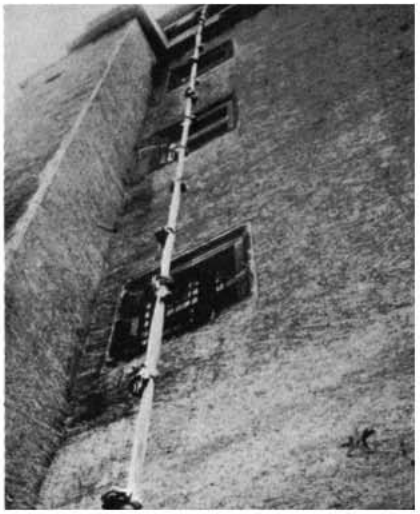
It was on May 8, during the clear-out of the store rooms of all unwanted equipment and furniture to deny it to the prisoners, that an impromptu escape attempt was mounted with two officers concealed in straw mattresses being loaded onto a cart to be transported to a skittle alley in Colditz town. Both men were subsequently recaptured but the attempt made it clear that much tighter control had to be exercised on all vehicles entering and leaving the prisoners' courtyard.

**At the time it was a complete mystery how the two Polish officers, 2nd Lieutenant Mietek Chmiel and Lieutenant 'Miki' Surmanowicz had escaped from their cells which the Germans found still locked the following morning. Like all conjuring tricks the secret always turns out to be simple when revealed, although this one even mystified other prisoners. The weakness in this case was that the doors were not set within the frame but fixed on hinges set in the outside wall of the cell with a heavy metal bar padlocked to the side opposite the hinges. Although the door was close to the passage floor, Miki managed to prise off a batten at the bottom which allowed him to lift the door off its vertical hinge-posts. The door then swung open 'hinged' on the padlock. Having replaced the wooden strip, he put the door back on its hinges and picked the lock of Mietek's cell next door before relocking it.**

**Then and now. The bed-sheet rope hanging from the attic on the west front of the guardhouse — one of the first pictures for the escape file.**

No sooner had this lesson been learned than an attempt was made to get out of the punishment cells using a bed-sheet rope. Reinhold Eggers explains:

'Two Polish officers were doing time in the courtyard cells. There were very few arrest cells actually in the castle — four stood in one corner of the prisoners' yard, close to the gate. One of these looked out on to the west terrace, the other three overlooked the yard on ground floor level, but a few steps up, as the yard sloped down to the gate. They had their windows painted over. All of the cell doors gave on to a corridor and at the end of this was the main door out to the yard steps. All doors were locked and bolted day and night. Lieutenant Surmanowicz was in one



**If the four main punishment cells were occupied, three others were available in the archway leading to the Kommandantur courtyard (see plan, pages 4–5). Overflow cells were also available in the town. On May 13, Lieutenant Just opened his door and that of the adjoining cell occupied by Lieutenant John Hyde-Thompson who held the makeshift rope as Just slid down the outer (west) face (*right*) to the gardens backing onto the town. He got clean away but was recaptured three days later near Basel.**

cell, Lieutenant Chmiel in another. Somehow, during the night, Surmanowicz got out of his cell, released Chmiel from his and then opened the door from the cells to the yard. From the Polish quarters three floors up, a rope was lowered, and the two were hauled up one at a time on to a ledge. They sidled along the ledge to a gutter, got up on the roof of the guardhouse, hauling the rope after them, and here, through a window, they climbed down into an attic. They then hung the rope out of the front window and started to slide down. Surmanowicz wore rubber soles, but unfortunately Chmiel had nails in his boots which scraped down the wall. A guard heard them and they were caught in mid-air.

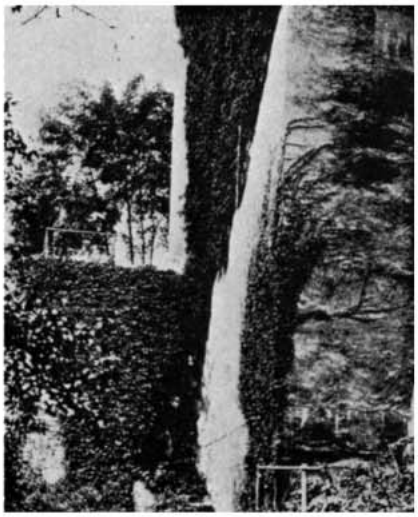
'As a result of this attempt', wrote Eggers, 'we stationed a sentry permanently inside the prisoners' courtyard day and night. This western face of the castle had plainly been the object of much thought among the prisoners, for two days later came another attempt, from the Archway as it was called. This lay outside the prisoners' courtyard. You passed under it between our German yard and the small approach yard, below the PoW Senior Officers' quarters. The approach was to the prisoners' gate and the guardroom just beside it. Prisoners got into the archway cells only when the four yard punishment cells were occupied. There were three cells under the archway and they looked on to the outer side of the castle. The ground beneath dropped down about forty feet to a terrace garden. From the edge of this garden, about fifty yards out, towards the valley, there was another drop down a steep bank to the backs of houses in the town at street level.'

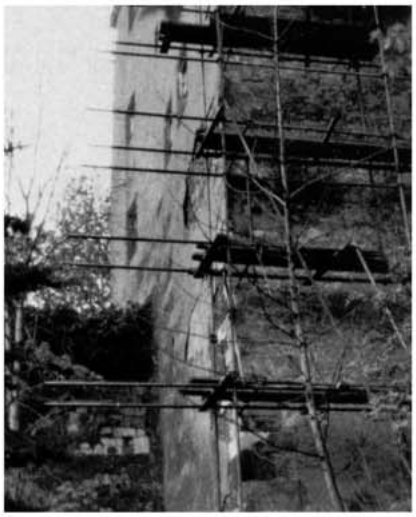
With the shock of two escape attempts from the cells within as many days, in Eggers' words, 'the prisoners were leading us a merry dance'.

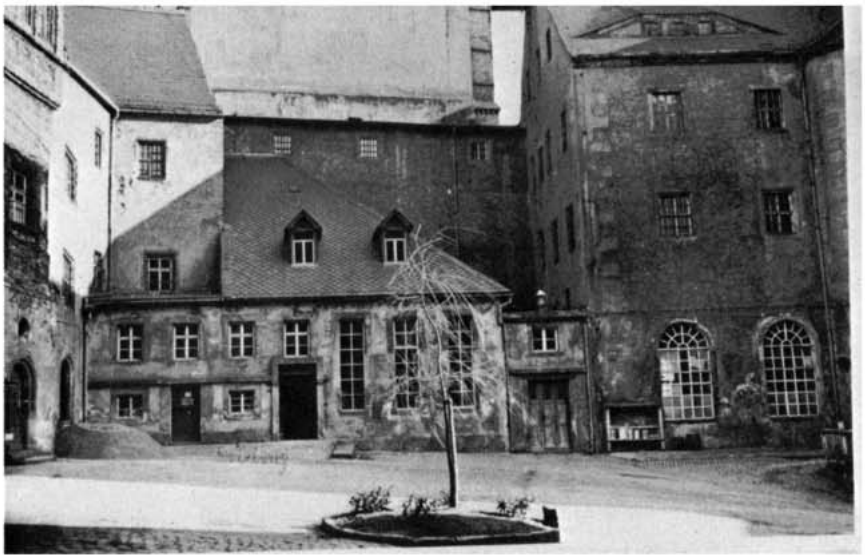
Back at the British canteen, one of the sentries reported that he had been offered 700 Reichsmarks (about £50) to look the other way while on duty on the terrace outside the canteen. His guard post was No. 9 and covered a small lawn beyond the canteen wall.

'We told this particular sentry to carry on with the game and keep us informed', said Eggers. 'In due course he got 100 marks as the first part of his bribe. Whitsun was coming. Staff were going on leave, and tension would be relaxed. The guard was due on duty again between 9 and 11 o'clock the Thursday evening before Whitsun, May 29th. It was then light till 8 o'clock. Two days before, the guard was told, "from now on keep your head down when on duty." He passed this on to us and we made our preparations.

**The picture *right* was taken by the photographer Lange from a window in the Kommandantur and shows the tunnel exit on the morning of May 30. Unfortunately this was one of the few pictures we were unable to match as the room from which it was taken is now one of the closed wards of the hospital. Also a lean-to has now been constructed against the outside wall *(far right)* with its concrete base covering the position of the exit.**







**Standing with one's back to the chapel, the opposite side of the prisoners' courtyard had three doorways. The large one near the centre led to the kitchens and scullery and the door to the left to what was called the Evidenz Room. Here the Kommandant conducted meetings with the senior officers nominally in charge of their individual national contingents. Next to the Evidenz Room in the corner lay the door to the canteen and it was from here that a major British escape attempt was mounted at the end of May. Led by Captain Pat Reid, twelve escapers were to proceed from a manhole in the canteen floor, along a sewer to where a tunnel had been dug to exit on a small grassy terrace. The picture above is an early post-war shot shortly after the willow was planted.**

**When the guards nabbed Pat Reid as he emerged outside, another squad rushed into the canteen to catch anyone inside the tunnel. The manhole was open and everyone was caught red-handed together with a massive haul of provisions.**

'The canteen. Somewhere near there they were going to break out, but where? From below? Impossible. The inside drain cover in the canteen floor was sealed. From above? Not in the searchlights. Would they fuse the lights and come down a rope in the dark? Would they get out of the canteen by one of the windows? The guard had been assured that there would be no traces after the escape, so he couldn't possibly be suspected. How were they going to get out? We thought and talked and felt very foolish. That we should have to wait on the prisoners for a line of action!

'All duty officers and a number of guards concentrated in a room in the Kommandantur building, where our north-east corner backed on to the canteen corner of the prisoners' yard. The door on to the grass terrace outside this damned canteen was on our side of the join in the two yards. We unlocked it quietly. An NCO and ten men were held ready in the guardroom outside the prisoners' gate, at the end of the approach yard.

'Twilight fell and the lights came on. The stage was set, we waited in the wings for the actors. Sentry No. 9 was pacing up and down. We couldn't see him as he was in dead ground below the level of the terrace. He was an absolute mass of nerves, and so the one most likely to start shooting. We were the ones most likely to catch it, too. We waited and watched. But what should we watch? Where to focus? We blinked at every sound. Our eyes watered with the strain. We watched. Suddenly came a movement on the grass. Was it a moth over the searchlight that flicked a shadow over the lawn? Now we could focus. A line appeared — a break. A patch of grass started to move upward. LO1 made a sign, "Wait!" A square of turf rose straight up out of the ground, held in a wooden frame, with legs, which now showed themselves. Then a man's hands and arms followed, pushing up the turf and frame by the legs. Then the frame was stood aside, and up came the British Captain Reid!

'*"Heraus"* — and we were on him! One man to the phone told the guard to occupy the canteen at once. Anyone in there to remain there. We caught ten British and two Polish officers in the canteen tunnel, including the British Senior Officer, Colonel German. All were in civilian clothes, all had passes; 85 marks in real money was found on the party, and 150lb weight of provisions, all Red Cross food, mostly in tins, plus chocolate and biscuits. What a haul for us!

'The prisoners had loosened the drain cover in the canteen and picked their way along the drain through the side wall. For night working this involved picking the locks of two doors, from their own staircase into the yard, and from the yard into the canteen.

'Security counter-measures followed. We began to change the sentries at irregular times. We saw to it that the same men did not return each time to the same post. We aimed to break any rhythm in guard postings that might give the prisoners a fixed person or fixed timing of any kind on which they could work.

'And the guard? He kept his 100 marks. He got extra leave, promotion, and the War Service Cross. It was worth it.

'This was our first big success, and due solely to the loyalty of one of our men.'

On May 31 another Frenchman, Lieutenant René Collin, was found to be missing and the security staff began to suspect the vulnerable exercise walk to the park.

*Left:* **Today part of the interior has been altered giving the appearance that the cover is further from the wall than it was.** *Above:* **Pictured by Karel Margry, Walter Teichmann and Tom Posch explore the canteen — the outer wall of the castle is the one on the right.**

The French meanwhile were taking every advantage of the exercise period in the park, seeing this as the weakest link in the German defences — which it was — achieving outright success in two attempts over the next three months. Within the park enclosure was an open-sided summer-house where, so long as the guards could be momentarily distracted, a man could hide in the roof beams. Then, providing the absence of the prisoner could be concealed for the count, he could climb down and out of the park when the coast was clear. Three men used this method to get away — Lieutenant René Collin on May 31, Lieutenant Pierre Mairesse Lebrun on June 9, and Lieutenant Pierre Odry on June 18. Only Collin achieved a successful home run, Lebrun and Odry being recaptured within a few miles of Colditz. The counts had been fixed by concealing a small officer beneath the cloak of a large officer for the first check at the castle so that he could genuinely stand in line for the escaper during the count before the return from the park. Of the summer-house these foundations are all that has survived.

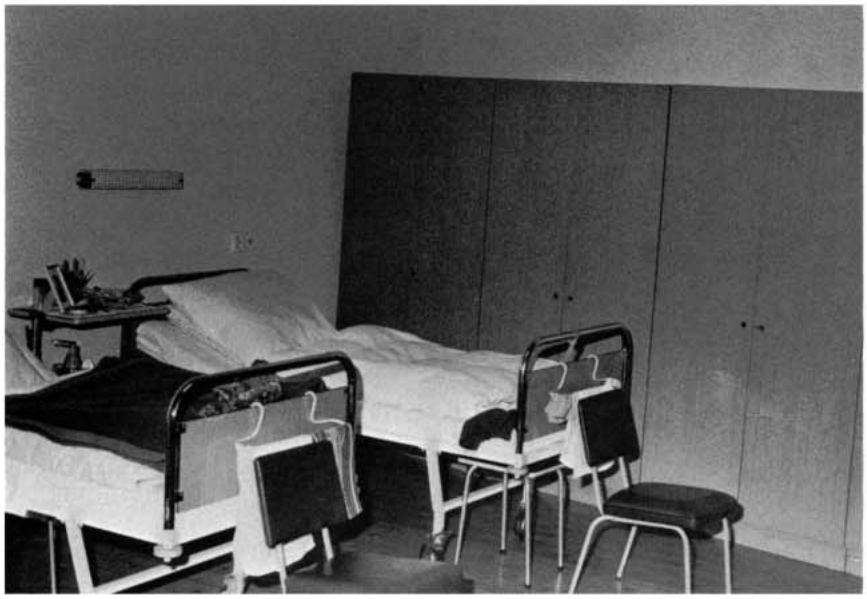
Pat Reid: 'On June 25 I was in a group of PoWs marching down to the park when an attractive German girl passed by, going up the ramp towards the courtyard. The prisoners whistled their admiration, for she was a veritable bronze-haired Rhine Maiden, smartly dressed and handsome — a fitting consort for a Germanic deity. As she swept by, her stylish wrist-watch fell from her arm at the feet of Squadron Leader Paddon. The Rhine Maiden did not notice, but Paddon, ever the gentleman, picked it up and shouted: "Hey, Miss, you've lost your watch." The girl had already passed out of sight, so Paddon signed to the nearest guard and called out: "Das Fraülein hat ihre Uhr verloren." The guard took the watch and, running back up the ramp, shouted to a sentry in the courtyard to stop the girl. As he made to do so, the sentry suddenly noticed something wrong. A moment's scrutiny was enough. By the time our guard arrived panting with the watch, the Rhine Maiden was exposed. Her fine hat and abundant wig were off, revealing beneath the bald head of Lieutenant Boulay.'

Every escape or attempted escape was recorded on film for the Colditz archive as a practical measure to teach newly-arrived security personnel the ingenuity of their charges. Together with the actual disguises and confiscations, it added up to a sizeable museum of escapology. Lieutenant Boulay's elaborate costume can be seen displayed on the mannekin on the left.

**After their recapture, both Mairesse Lebrun and Odry were serving time in the cells. However, all prisoners in solitary confinement were allowed down to the park for exercise, but at a different time to the other prisoners. Being fewer in number they only had three guards under an NCO. Lebrun *(left)* was determined to make another attempt but this time it was to be what was probably the most audacious escape of all — in the very presence of the guards. *Above:* This is the flat 'play' area of the enclosure as it appears today with the cemented outer wall in the background; one must imagine the palisade fence coming out at right-angles at the point where the rough stonework begins. Picture the scene on July 2 some time between 12.30 and 2.30 p.m. — the designated exercise period for the prisoners on solitary. One guard armed with a bolt-action rifle would be standing on each of the three sides, outside the fence at a higher level, while the few prisoners wandered about inside. Lebrun had already sought the help of his friend Pierre Odry but had delayed his plans several times because the guards on those particular days appeared more alert. Now on this Monday the sentries looked older men giving him more of a chance. Selecting a point facing the fence on the left in the picture, he lined up using a tree to hide him from the German on that side. Shortly before half-past two he made his move. Using Odry's cupped hands as a springboard, Lebrun suddenly ran at the fence and catapulted up and over. He landed two or three metres from the astonished guard and began running zig-zag fashion towards the stone wall. A splinter from one of the bullets ricochetting from the wall stung his face but, grabbing the opportunity as the German reloaded, he scaled the wall some three to five metres from the fence using the rough stones for hand-holds. Once over the wall, the Germans were at a disadvantage and Lebrun, dressed only in sports kit, was able to reach a wheat-field about three kilometres from the castle. Walking in backwards, carefully rearranging the stalks to hide his path, he lay doggo until ten o'clock when it was dark. Eventually, by walking and cycling, he reached Switzerland over 400 kilometres away.**

Whereas the castle itself was ringed with sentries, searchlights and barbed wire, each day the prisoners were escorted *through* these defences to the relative insecurity of the park. Several attempts to get away either on the walk or in the park itself were mounted in June: by Lieutenant Pierre Mairesse Lebrun on the 9th, by Lieutenant Odry on the 18th, and by Lieutenant Boulay the following week while disguised as a woman. Then on July 2 the athletic Lebrun, still under punishment arrest for the earlier attempt, leapt the palisade with the assistance of a friend during an exercise period.

**As a result of this escape, the fence was raised with wire from six to eight feet; prisoners on solitary confinement took their exercise period on the castle terrace instead of the park, and a doorway was cut in the stone wall to enable the guards to follow any prisoner attempting to duplicate Lebrun's escapade. This is David Ray's picture of that doorway today and of the wall close to where Lebrun got over. Although the fence has gone, the metal brackets for the barbed wire still remain.**



**By now Pat Reid recalls that the escaping season was in full flood with hardly a day passing without an incident. On July 31 the security staff foiled a multi-national mass escape from the room over the canteen which backed onto the Kommandantur. This was an attempt to breach the vulnerable 'seam' between the two parts of the castle by breaking through into the German ablutions but the noise of the work to cut through the wall had been heard and the toilet area put under constant surveillance.** *Left:* **This is where the breakout began — the former British 'Long Room' — now completely rebuilt and refurbished for a geriatric ward.** *Right:* **On the other side of the wall, Karel photographs Tom Posch examining the door facing the toilets for the German spyhole. Alas none was visible.**

Although fired upon by the guards, because of the intervening wall they were unable to immediately give chase, and Lebrun managed to get clean away. Belated steps to counter any repeat performance were made by increasing the height with barbed wire and putting a doorway in the wall so the guards could follow any would-be escaper.

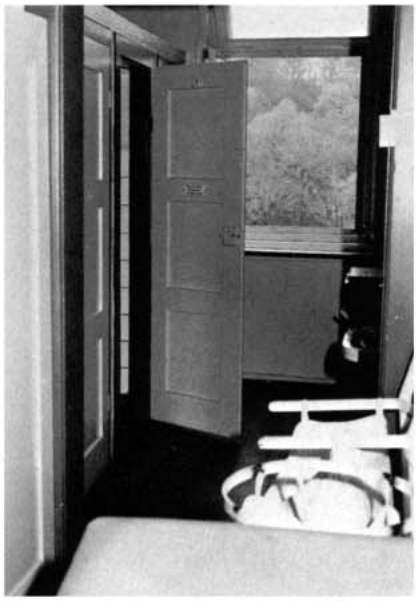
Although Lebrun's escape brought the number of 'home runs' to three, the next round went to the Germans when a number of escapers were caught in the act. The attempt had been planned from the so-called Long Room on the floor above the canteen where one wall backed onto the German quarters. Hauptmann Eggers explains how the plot was foiled:

'The guard quarters in the Kommandantur were in the north-east corner of our yard at the far end of a corridor on the first floor. Right at the end were our lavatories. The wall behind the lavatories was the wall of the British Long Room. One night while the guard was doing duty the prisoners started to work at their side of the wall. They assumed our quarters were empty, but our telephone switchboard was up that way, and day and night a telephonist was on duty. He went out to the lavatory during the night. He heard a noise, a scratching in the wall. It stopped and started again. Our man called up Security. The Security Officer came along with the Duty Officer, and they listened. Someone was working behind the wall there, level with the second lavatory. They decided to do nothing. "Let them tunnel. It will keep them busy and happy," said LO1. "And go on using the lavatories normally."

'Next day the Riot Squad kept a check on the noises; they went on at intervals night and day. The wall was not more than eighteen inches thick. Any break-out would happen very soon. The prisoners must have known they couldn't hope to hide the working end of their hole for long.

'We reckoned the break would be over the weekend at mealtime. Our officers would then be in their mess, the guard would be on duty or having their meal too. The Kommandantur buildings would be practically empty. They were going to break into that building obviously, but how did they think they were going to get out of it? To get in through the lavatory was only the first step. They had then to get out of the Kommandantur somehow, without being seen. Perhaps they thought they could get out of one of our windows, unbarred on our side of the castle.

'Anyway, once again the mouse would not have the chance to wander further than the cat would let him. We set to work too. We bored a hole through the door of the guards'



*Left:* **The toilets today with the door to the second lavatory open.** *Centre:* **As each pair of escapers emerged and tiptoed down the corridor they were quietly arrested. In all, ten of the twelve were caught — here Lieutenant Peter Allan in the 'gor blimey' cap is made to re-enact the event for Lange's camera.** *Right:* **Such are the places where history is made.**

**Hauptmann Eggers kept detailed records and claimed that more than 300 would-be escapers were caught in the act. Here are ten of them. L–R rear row: Lieutenant Peter Allan, Sous-Lieutenant J. Verkest (the small officer who had helped 'fix' the French roll-calls), Lieutenant John Hyde-Thompson, Flight Lieutenant Donald Middleton, Flying Officer 'Erroll' Flynn and Cadet-Officer A. Karpf. Front row: Lieutenants Alan Cheetham, Tommy Elliot, Teddy Barton and Lieutenant E. Arcq.** *Right:* **A favourite spot for photographing miscreants was the terrace of the Kommandantur.**

sleeping quarters so as to keep a watch on the door coming out of the lavatories. We kept this door closed. For two days the Riot Squad listened and watched. Finally they noticed a minute spy-hole in the plaster of the lavatory back wall on our side. Action stations. It was Sunday. In due course out of the lavatories came the first pair. They closed the door and started off on their adventure. We whipped our door open — "This way, please, gentlemen!" Astounded, they followed us in, so astounded that they did not even shout to warn the others behind them. . . .

'No fewer than five pairs came out in all at five-minute intervals. . . . We rang the guardroom, and the Riot Squad stormed across the yard up to the British Long Room. Everyone there was in uniform, the rest of the escape queue had done a quick change. We found one of the stoves crammed with civilian clothes, and the haul of passes and money and food from the ten we did catch was impressive.'

The game of cat and mouse may have swung momentarily in favour of the gaolers, but in August and September a series of successes shot the Dutch to the top of the escape league table. Eggers admits that over-confidence may have caused them to grow careless but 'these events made us adopt almost panic security measures . . . as once again we were faced with an unknown breach in our defences.'

Altogether there were three escapes, each of two men, but as there has been much written about them in the past which is not correct, it may be helpful to summarise what

**SUCCESSFUL ESCAPES FROM COLDITZ CASTLE OR GROUNDS OF PRISONERS UNDER THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE STAFF OF OFLAG IVC**

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **1941** | | | |
| April 11 | Le Ray | Lieut. A. | French |
| May 31 | Collin | Lieut. R. | French |
| July 2 | Mairesse Lebrun | Lieut. P. | French |
| August 17* (15) | Steinmetz | Lt.ter Zee, 2 Class F. | Dutch |
| August 17* (15) | Larive | Lt.ter Zee, 2 Class E. H. | Dutch |
| September 21* (20) | Giebel | Major C. | Dutch |
| September 21* (20) | Drijber | Luit. O. L. | Dutch |
| December 17 | Durand-Hornus | Lieut. J. | French |
| December 17 | de Frondeville | Lieut. G. | French |
| December 17 | Prot | Lieut. J. | French |
| **1942** | | | |
| January 5 | Neave | Lieut. A. M. S. | British |
| January 5 | Luteyn | Luit. A. P. T. | Dutch |
| September 9 | Fowler | Lieut. H. N. | British |
| September 9 | van Doorninck | Lt. ter Zee, 1 Class D. J. | Dutch |
| October 15* (14) | Reid | Capt. P. R. | British |
| October 15* (14) | Littledale | Major R. B. | British |
| October 15* (14) | Stephens | Lieut.-Commander W. E. | British |
| October 15* (14) | Wardle | Flt. Lieut. H. D. | British |

* Dates according to German records — actual date of escape in brackets

**Within the scope of this article one can really only scratch the surface, considering the hundreds of escape attempts made from Colditz. More than 130 prisoners managed to get clear of the castle grounds, Eggers** *(left)* **admitting to 19 successful home runs by prisoners under the jurisdiction of the Oflag IVC security staff. He includes in this total Lieutenant Bill Millar who escaped in January 1944 but it is debatable whether his escape should be described as a home run as he is listed as missing on the Bayeux memorial. It is believed he was caught and possibly executed in Mauthausen concentration camp. By limiting coverage to the 18 listed above, your Editor is very mindful that he is treading on eggshells, as Major Reid claims 31 home runs in *Colditz The Full Story* — 1 Belgian, 11 British, 6 Dutch, 12 French and 1 Polish. However, as 11 of these were from locations other than Colditz — albeit by Colditz inmates — mainly from hospitals, one feels that they should be set apart from classic hot-blooded successes like Lebrun's or Reid's own from under the very noses of the German guards.**

actually happened. (The incorrect dates given by Eggers in his list are perhaps understandable because the first and third attempts were hidden from the Germans at the evening roll calls so the escape would not have been noted in German records as such until the absences came to light.)

The first two to escape, Captain Dolf Dufour and Lieutenant John Smit of the Royal Netherlands East Indies Army, had got away on August 13 but, although their absence was successfully covered up for the evening roll calls, they were recaptured on the Swiss border on August 16. The previous day two other Dutch officers, Luitenants Hans Larive and Franz Steinmetz of the Royal Netherlands Navy, had escaped from the park.

'We cancelled the walk for a while and tightened up every part of our patrol system', wrote Eggers, 'and we arranged for a halt on the way back from the park now and again to make an extra count when the "walk" was not expecting one.' One can therefore imagine the furore in the German camp when no sooner had the walk been started again than two more Dutchmen were found to be missing on September 21 (they had actually escaped the previous day). This time it was Major Coen Giebel and Luitenant Oscar Drijber of the East Indies Army.

The German security staff racked their

**The level of escape attempts rose immeasurably following the arrival of the Dutch contingent on July 24, 1941. After the Netherlands had capitulated in May 1940, all regular Servicemen were requested to sign a pledge of non-opposition to the occupation forces. Out of nearly 15,000 who had been captured, 68 of their number who refused to sign ended up in Colditz. They soon set about testing the German defences under their brilliant escape officer — Captain Machiel van den Heuvel (third from left in rear row).**

brains to work out how they could have got out. Eggers said that 'we thought that perhaps during some diversion, perhaps during the football or handball games in the sheep pen they might have dug under the palisade fence and got down unobserved into the stream and perhaps hidden up under the bridge until the "walk" had gone.'

However it was all speculation until some weeks later one of the more observant sentries on duty in the park spotted a crowd of prisoners grouped around a manhole cover in the 'sheep pen' — the name given to the area of the park fenced off and devoted to games. The manhole had been inspected before — after the August security review — but it was only a brick-lined drainage pit about fifteen feet deep leading nowhere. Nevertheless, the opportunity had been taken by the Germans at the time to bolt the cover down. Now the guard spotted two of the group effortlessly lift the cover and disappear below ground. The alarm was raised and Lieutenant Wardle and Lieutenant Wojciechowski were found inside.

This discovery gave the Germans their first clue as to how the escapes might have been mounted: by secreting men below ground who could then escape from the park when darkness fell. It did not explain, however, how it could have been used after the bolt had been fitted because, as Eggers recalled, 'we had looked at that cover so many times and tried and tried the bolt on top.' As it was he had to wait until after the war to find out how that part of it been done. And how had the roll-calls been fixed?

The whole sequence of events, established by Karel Margry in the Netherlands after speaking to those who took part, and on examination of the park in 1988, was as follows:

August 13: When the PoWs gathered for the pre-walk roll-call, two British PoWs, from whom the privilege of the walk had been temporarily withdrawn because of some minor offence, were picked out of the crowd and had to stay behind. When later, at the roll call in the park before the walk back to the castle, two men were missing, the Dutch fooled the Germans into believing that they must have mistakenly included the two Britishers in their first count.

At the first evening roll call, the Dutch, whose habit of standing in straight, disciplined rows had made the Germans casual, fooled the Germans again when, instead of the normal thirteen rows of five men, they included in their formation two rows of four — and got away with it.

At the second evening roll call, two Poles were smuggled in to fill the gaps in the Dutch ranks.

August 15: While Steinmetz and Larive slipped into the manhole, the attention of the German guards was distracted, as with the first escape, by a volleyball game (it makes people look upwards instead of on the ground). Meanwhile, in another corner, another Dutchman, Luitenant Gerrit Dames, working wire-cutters behind his back, cut a hole in the fence and, at the right moment, crept through and started walking (thus running the great risk of being shot by the guards). On being spotted, he shouted 'Run! Run!' giving the impression that others had gone through before him. The trick worked: an immediate roll call was held and, when two men were found missing, the Germans concluded they must have slipped out before Dames. A search outside the park of course found nobody. This left Steinmetz and Larive free to escape from the park in the evening.

September 20: Two small-sized prisoners, a Pole and a Frenchman, hid under the long, black Dutch army cloaks of Captains Romswinckel and Willer, both hefty and tall, at the pre-walk roll call and made up for the missing two on return.

The bolt which the Germans had since fitted to the manhole cover was replaced by one specially made of glass. This could withstand inspection from the outside and

**'Vandy', as the British nicknamed him, soon focused his attention on the park as offering the best chance of escape. As the other nationalities had already proved, an escape from here avoided the necessity of penetrating the castle's own security systems as the Germans kindly escorted them through them each day. In the exercise area Vandy had quickly spotted a manhole near the brook and his fertile brain soon conceived how it might be utilised to advantage. In hindsight his plan seems simple but, as Pat Reid admits, 'nobody had realised the tremendous possibilities it offered,' least of all the Germans! The wooden cover was loose, hinged on one side, and an inspection revealed it to be about 15 feet deep with iron rungs leading down to the water which was about 5 feet deep. Providing the count could be fixed prior to the return to the castle, it would be fairly simple to leave two officers down the hole who could them emerge when it was dark. With variations (described in the text), the manhole turned out to be the most successful escape idea, and it was used three times over the next few weeks, four out of the six escapers achieving home runs. A few weeks after the third escape, two prisoners were spotted by the guards disappearing down the manhole and it is believed that the Germans subsequently filled in the hole. Karel Margry quartered the whole of the southern end of the former enclosure before finding it, minus its cover. It was about a foot deep. Later we discovered that it was David Ray with Colditz aficionado Michael Booker who had first dug it out in 1980.**

**Much has been written of the unique way the Dutch covered up absences at roll-calls using dummies. The subterfuge was made easier because of the orderly fashion with which the Dutchmen lined up for the count. Made from a mixture of cement and plaster by a Polish officer, the dummies were carried either by 2nd Luitenant Leo de Hartog (*above left*) or 2nd Luitenant Bill Grijzen, and were first brought into use at the evening Appell on September 20 after the third manhole escape. De Hartog explains that the dummies, although professionally made, would never fool anyone other than in half-light and he was strongly against using them in daytime. As it was, the first one — dubbed 'Max' by the Germans — was discovered three months later on December 12 when it was being used to cover another escape in the park. *Above right:* In this picture, taken some time after the event on the terrace behind the guard-house, Max is paraded with, from left to right, Luitenant Frits Kruimink (whose escape the dummies were supposed to cover up), Luitenant Diederick van Lynden, Luitenant Gijs van Nimwegen, Max with Luitenant de Hartog, Luitenant Herman Donkers, Luitenant Douw van der Krap (the other man caught in the park with Kruimink, hiding in a hollow camouflaged by a sheet on which leaves had been sewn), and Captain Frits Bijvoet.**

could be broken by the men inside when they pushed up the cover. This escape, incidentally was the *only one* at which the glass - tube - to - replace - the - cover - nut - and - bolt - trick was used, as it only became necessary when the Germans fastened the cover after the August escapes. It was, however, only bolted down, not locked.

During the autumn of 1941 the first evidence came to light of a major tunnelling effort when wooden ceiling joists in the French quarters were seen to be cracked. On checking above, tons of accumulated rubble were found stored in the eaves of the attics, the amount indicating not only a long tunnel but one which must be very advanced. However, renewed vigilance, increased roll calls to shorten the free time the prisoners had available, and redoubled search procedures failed to establish where the tunnel began. It was a worrying development which was reported to the local Area IV HQ at Dresden and the OKW in Berlin.

Meanwhile several other escape attempts were foiled, one mounted by the Belgian contingent from the park, another by the British over the roofs, and a third by the Dutch who tried to get two prisoners out through the main gate dressed as German officers. Then on December 17 three French officers successfully achieved home runs although it is debatable whether their escape should be considered a genuine one from Colditz itself. During a visit to the town dentist, Lieutenants Jacques Durand-Hornus, Guy de Frondeville and Jacques Prot grabbed the opportunity to split and run and, helped by the fog and rain that evening, disappeared into the night.

At the end of the year the security staff took stock of the situation and, despite the ten home runs, they could nevertheless be proud of their overall record.

**In February, Max's brother 'Moritz' was confiscated when the Dutch balcony tunnel was discovered making another nice exhibit for the growing Colditz museum although as he was captured without his original Dutch cap, in this picture he has been given a fake German one.**

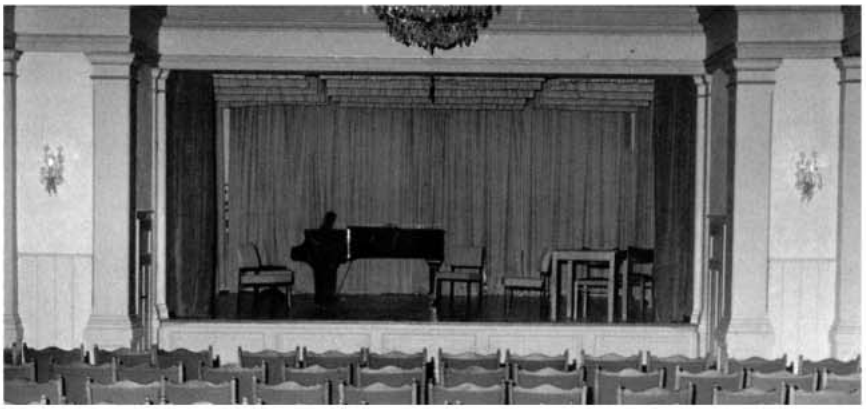
**So far the British had not achieved any home runs, neither had anyone successfully escaped from the castle itself. As can be seen from the number of captured German uniforms in the picture opposite, many prisoners felt that the easiest way to get out might be masquerading as a member of the opposition. However, as we have seen, part of the security system was the production of a numbered brass disc by anyone entering or leaving the prisoners' yard and several people had been caught earlier in the year trying to get out without one. Readers will recall that the prisoners had obtained disc No. 26 in July — the painter told the Germans he had lost it although he had in fact been offered a bribe to hand it over — and consequently the guards were warned to watch out for it. On August 28, right after the evening roll call, a junior NCO leaving the prisoners' yard, handed in his disc at the gate with the words: 'I've got a message to the Kommandant from the Duty Officer.' He thereupon promptly turned left towards the Kommandantur instead of the guardroom like everyone else. The guard looked down at the disc in his hand: No. 26! The game was up and Lieutenant Airey Neave was taken into custody. Next day Lange arrived with his camera (*left*). Pat Reid admits that 'I, as escape officer, should perhaps have had the foresight to arrange that a digit on the disc was suitably altered before Airey used it'. Nevertheless, although this particular attempt had failed, the principle of dressing up as a German was still valid, and it was while Reid was serving a period of solitary in the courtyard cells that another idea dawned on him. For hour after hour he had been staring at the Saalhaus (which housed the theatre on its third floor) outside his window; suddenly he realised that the stage might extend over German-occupied territory. If it did, then it might be possible for someone to gain access to the corridor which joined the Saalhouse and the guardhouse (on the left in the picture *above*). Someone could then leave directly from the guardroom door itself, which would not only look natural, but would bypass the disc system at the courtyard gate.**

So far all the successful home runs had been mounted from outside the castle proper, but the New Year brought the first from within the building itself. It was a combined Dutch-British effort as Hauptmann Eggers recounts:

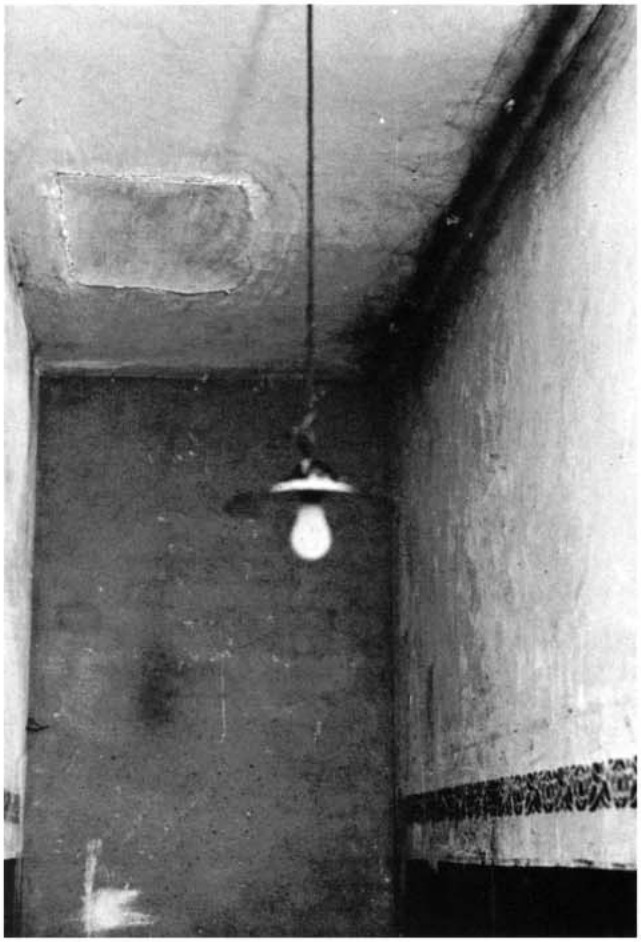
'On January 7th we found four officers had gone — vanished without trace! Those missing were two Dutch lieutenants, Luteyn and Donkers, and two British, Neave and Hyde-Thompson. Their senior officers gladly and most unexpectedly gave us their names, without putting us to the trouble of finding out exactly who had got away. How very suspicious! How very damnably sure they must have been of themselves and their mysterious bolt-hole! And not a breath of suspicion to be traced anywhere around our ring of guards.

'We ran another of our special searches, from 10 a.m. to 2 in the afternoon of that day, keeping over 500 prisoners in the cold of the yard while we did it. The noise was so loud, unceasing and so threatening, that the Kreisleiter phoned from the town to ask what was up. He said the townspeople were getting upset! We found nothing. Tiger [nickname for Hauptmann Teichert, one of the security officers] and his dogs went round the outside of the Schloss along the upper edge of the park, looking for a tunnel exit or traces in the snow. No luck at all.

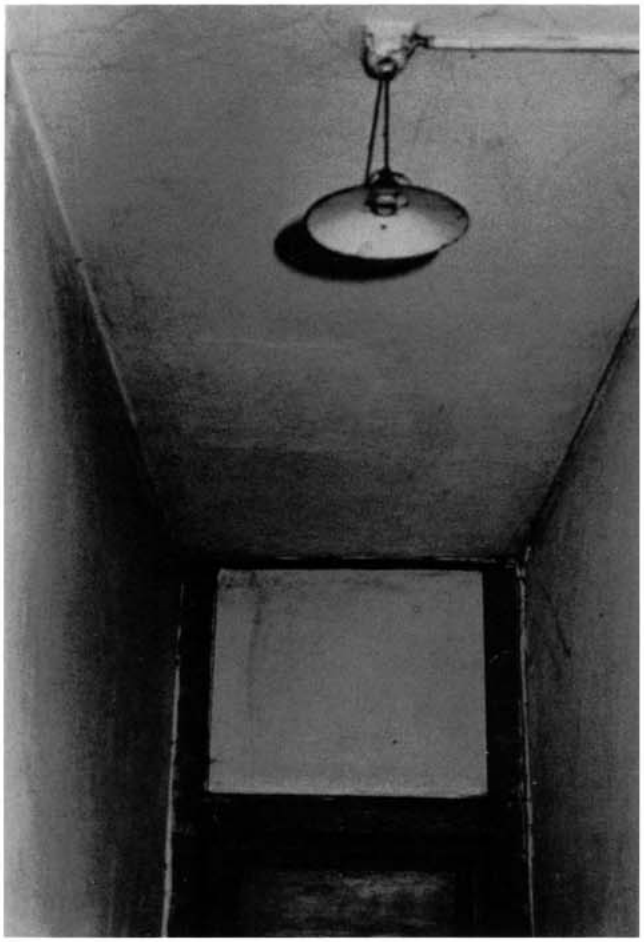
'By then the OKW was getting worried. They began to ask about the "spoil" from an obvious tunnel which we had been reporting off and on for weeks. They bombarded us



**Finale on the stage of the theatre in the Christmas show in 1941. Airey Neave is on the left in the mortar-board with his co-escaper, Luitenant Tony Luteyn, on the extreme left in the orchestra pit.**



**After his release, Pat Reid tested his theory by making a hole in the floor under the stage. It came out in a small room at the end of the corridor which led back over the archway to the guardroom. The hole was camouflaged as best as possible with a piece of false ceiling in a wooden frame.**



**Forty-six years later. Fortunately for the historically-minded, a tell-tale raised mark remains on the repaired ceiling. In 1942 this end of the room was a cul-de-sac; now a doorway has been cut to connect the room with a corridor on the second floor of the Saalhaus building.**

with questions and advice. . . . Something had to be done. The Kommandant and Security Officer were panicking . . .

'This exit could really only be found by the Senior Duty Officer, who at this time was myself, co-operating with the staff NCOs, Oberstabsfeldwebel Gephard and Unteroffizier Schädlich, who were in charge of the orderlies and daily jobs in the prisoners' quarters and yard. . . . Having made our plan to search all the parts of the castle not occupied in the normal way, we started on our more or less private search.

'First we looked into the big cellar under the French quarters in the west, or cellar, block. Nothing but potatoes here, the walls all solid stonework or natural rock. No suspicion of an indication of any digging here. Next we searched the former wine cellar, long since empty of bottles. Often I had examined the walls, which were also partly cut into the natural rock. We found nothing. We left the potato cellar and next day we searched the chapel. We moved the altar aside — nothing underneath. We went through the sacristy pretty thoroughly — nothing there. We inspected the organ and the deep window niches — everything in order, even to the layers of dust.

'By the 13th we had discovered nothing. On parade that morning no one was missing, so we felt safe for another day. On the other hand, we had felt just the same the previous week when four officers had been found missing and, furthermore, must have been missing and somehow covered up for more than one roll-call.

'That morning the theatre was down on our list for search. This was on the third floor of the Saalhaus. It was used for plays, concerts, PT, boxing, fencing, lectures, and so on. We occupied some of the ground floor of that block, so there wasn't much prospect of finding a tunnel. The south end of the upper floors, occupied by the prisoners, had windows looking out over our own yard, or else was walled off from our north wing. The west front of this building looked out over the approach yard between the archway and the guardroom, the back adjoined the orderlies' quarters, which looked out over the prisoners' yard.

'We went over the theatre floor, tapped the walls, looked up at the ceiling, examined the window bars, and inspected the small green-rooms each side of the stage. Then we came to the stage itself. There it was — just a stage. I ran my eye over it, and my mind around it. Was there a trapdoor in this stage, I wondered? How deep was it underneath? And then — had we ever looked under the stage? Unteroffizier Schädlich (nicknamed the 'Ferret' by the British) said we never had, as far as he could remember. So I told him to get down into the prompter's box and shine his torch around.

'Schädlich prised a board out of the prompter's steps and did what I said. I told him to climb in and search around under the boards. He couldn't get through the hole, being too fat, and I was on the point of giving up the idea. However, we had made a rule, and that demanded that we inspect every single surface, even the most unlikely ones. Seeking a further reason for the extra mental effort on my part, and the extra physical one on the Ferret's, or someone else's, I thought we might find a hide under the stage. So I went down to the guardroom and told them to send the smallest man they had up to the theatre, to force a way through and have a look at this slightly suspected space under the stage. I was still in the guardroom ten minutes later when the man came hurrying down again — "Herr Hauptmann — we have found a hole under the stage."

'I rushed back upstairs, to find they had broken away all the prompter's steps, crawled to the back and found a hole about two feet square in the flooring. Schädlich had pulled out a plaster-covered framework which covered the hole, fixed with turnbuckles to the joists each side. The floor under the stage was, at the back, the ceiling of an unused cul-de-sac below, that came from the German quarters on the upper floor of the guardroom building. We had never taken measurements of all the floors as this passageway was never used, and it was behind a locked door on our side. So we had left the prisoners a very simple barrier, no more than a floor-ceiling between their quarters plus a door into a passage on our side to get through. What's more, the passage ran from the Saalhaus building, to the guardroom building, over the top of the yard gate! There was even a window in it above the gate. Never seeing anyone at this window, the PoWs must have worked out that here was some more dead ground for them to work in! They did not have to break through a vertical wall — they simply had little more than to drop through a horizontal one of lath and plaster. I went down to the guardroom, up the stairs, along the passage over the gate, through a door and arrived at the dead end under the back of the stage. We had taken

**Neave and Luteyn got away on the night of January 5, 1942, part of the success being that Vandy had managed to cover up both Appells on the 6th. That night Lieutenant John Hyde-Thompson and Luitenant Herman Donkers repeated the performance. The next day the Germans discovered that four prisoners were missing but it took them over a week to find out how they had got out. Naturally the hole had been sealed after each escape as it was hoped that the route could be used again.**

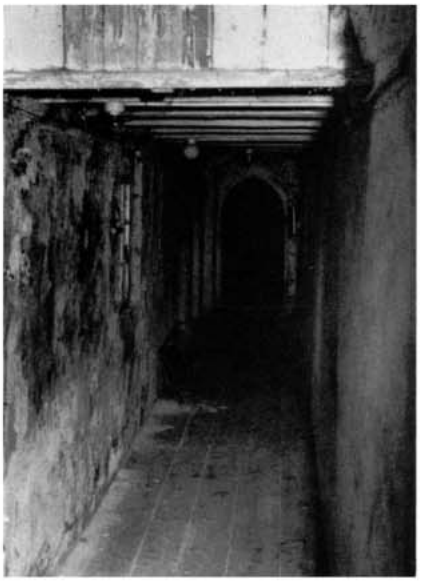
*Left:* **One of Lange's photographs showed how it was done.** *Right:* **In 1985 on the occasion of the fortieth anniversary of the liberation of the castle, former prisoners returned for a nostalgic reunion. They also visited the museum some 150 yards up the street from the main gate. Here Pat Reid shows Bill 'Lulu' Lawton the original false ceiling panel, dubbed by Reid 'Shovewood IV' being the fourth false trapdoor he had constructed. (Photo by Michael Booker.)**

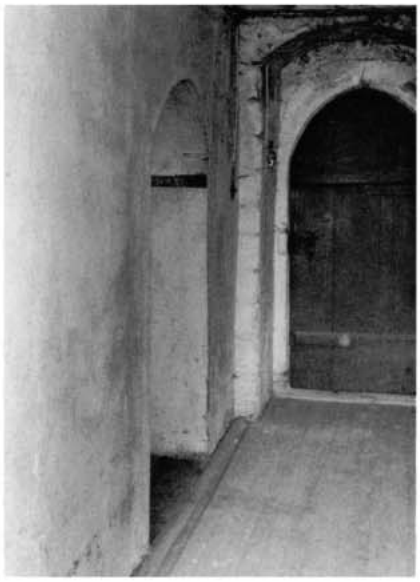
the framework out and there was a hole in the ceiling large enough to take a man through without brushing off the plaster each side. So confident had they been over this exit that no camouflage to speak of had been used to cover the framework on the top side, and close alongside, under the stage, we found a rope made of bed-sheets, for lowering the escapers to the floor underneath. This was obviously how the four of them had got out the week previously.

'The corridor ran back over the yard gate to the top floor of the guardroom building, and from there a spiral staircase descended past our officers' mess, or Casino as we called it, down past the guard quarters on the first floor, and so to a passage outside the guardroom on the ground floor.

'We checked back, interviewing guards. Naturally no one remembered anything a week after the event, but some one or more of them must have let four prisoners past, two on each of two occasions, presumably in perfect disguise as German military personnel. That meant that they had not been stopped for their passes. This was a breach of one of our most important orders, one which we could never get properly observed. We worked out all the possibilities, and in the end decided there was only one way the four could have taken, and that was straight past the guardroom at the foot of the staircase, out of the guardroom entrance into the approach yard and on under the archway into the German yard. Now from here we did find there was a possible way out, completely unguarded. At the south-west corner of our yard the way led again under an archway, and over a bridge crossing the old moat or ditch to the main gate. At the inner end of the bridge there was a wicket gate and a path leading down into the moat and along to the married quarters as a short cut. Officers going out for hospital treatment could have noticed this wide-open gap in our defences, and made a mental note of it for future use.

'More precautionary measures were once again forced upon us. To begin with, we walled up the wicket gate, and made a new door in view of the gatehouse guard. Then we closed the theatre, which didn't hurt anybody really, and moved our officers' mess from over the guardroom to the comparative safety of the German yard. Sarcastic comments from the "opposition" in our mess. The prisoners were driving us out of our own Casino! Who runs this joint? The door at the top of the guardroom stairs, which led to this dead-end passage, was doubly bolted. The horses, however, had gone.





**Karel Margry follows the route to freedom.** *Left:* **The passage over the PoW yard gate.** *Centre:* **At the far end of the bridge the escapers turned left . . . entering the top floor of the German guardhouse** *right,* **now the children's ward.**

*Above L-R:* **Down the stairs past the door to the officers' mess on the first floor . . . past the guardroom on the ground floor . . . and out through the door, stepping into the guardhouse courtyard where they passed the first sentry . . .**

'Five days after the four vanished we clawed back a point. The railway police at Ulm had let two suspicious Dutch electrical workers carry on with their journey on the 8th, the day after the escape from Colditz. But when two more arrived by the same train at the same time the next day, going likewise to Tuttlingen, the police questioned them a little more closely, and finally phoned us that they had Lieutenants Hyde-Thompson and Donkers, of our address, if we wished to collect them. Neave and Luteyn got over the Swiss frontier successfully.'

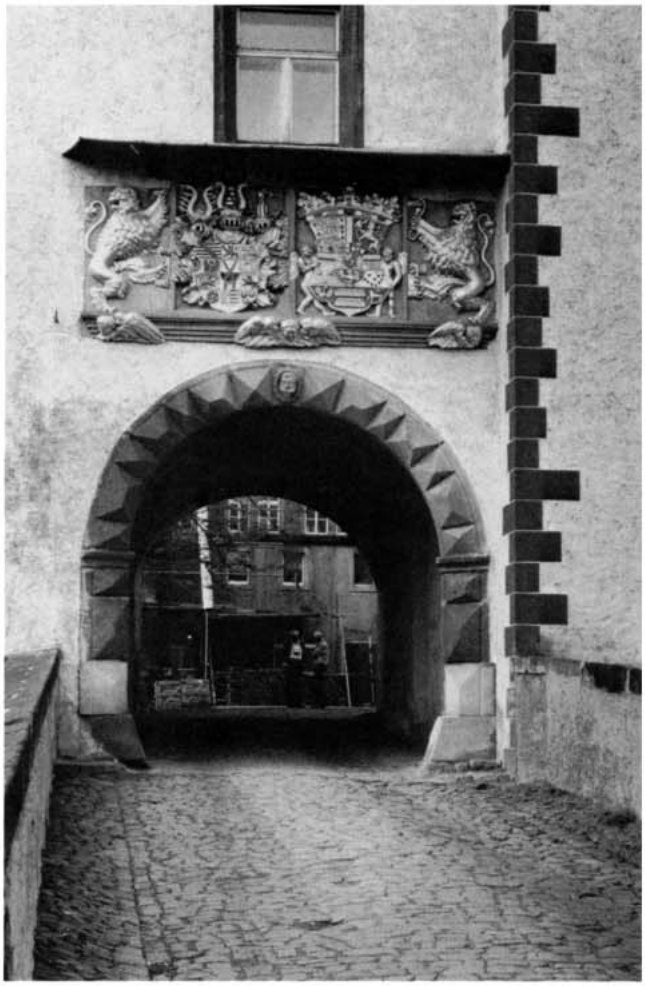
The escape via the theatre had been originally thought up by Pat Reid, the British 'escape officer' appointed to liaise attempts to escape to ensure that one prisoner's idea was not infringed or compromised by that of another. As the imitation German uniforms could not be perfected without the assistance of the Dutch, whose Army greatcoat could be fairly easily adapted to look like a German one, two Dutch officers had been invited to join the team. Lieutenant Neave wrote of his escape in 1954 in *They Have Their Exits* and in *Saturday at M.I.9.*:

'At Colditz' wrote Neave in 1969, 'no one thought of anything but escape and a committee was formed to fix priorities for the plans with most chance of success. I had first been to Germany at the age of seventeen and I spoke German fairly well, but my first plan, though selected by the Committee, was more of a theatrical performance than an escape. In August 1941, after an evening parade in the inner courtyard of Colditz, I managed to march past the sentry at the gate dressed in a home-made German corporal's "uniform" by showing a stolen metal disc. The "uniform" was a Polish tunic to which I had applied scenery paint from the camp theatre. Under the arc-lights along the causeway outside, it appeared bright green instead of field grey. I was immediately surrounded by the guards, hustled off to the cells, and threatened with the death penalty for an insult to the Wehrmacht. My uniform was such a pantomime affair that I could hardly blame them.

'Next day I was photographed for German police records, and later, after pleading that under the Geneva Convention a prisoner was entitled to take all reasonable steps to escape, I was sentenced to a month in the town jail. To reach it, I was marched across a drawbridge *(sic)* over a dry moat, and so discovered a new method of escaping from the castle.

**. . . after the first on towards the second sentry under the archway to the German yard. At both escapes the sentry, when he saw what he believed to be German officers approaching through the driving snow, unhesitatingly opened the gate . . .**

**. . . straight on to the clocktower archway with the third sentry and second security gate. The moat bridge and the main gate — the final most scrupulous check of all and the one to be avoided — are visible beyond.**



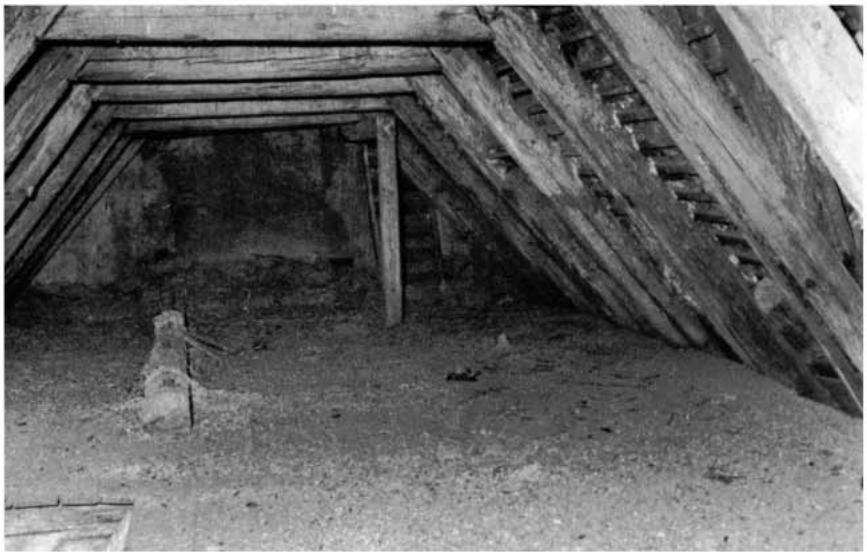
**When Airey Neave was caught after his first escape, he had to serve his sentence in the town jail because the castle cells were all full. Returning across the moat bridge (*above left*) he spotted the small iron gate set into the wall on the right-hand side. This gave access to the moat (which of course was dry), enabling officers to take a short cut around the Kommandatur wall to their married quarters (see page 10) beside the road to the park. *Above right:* After the escape route was determined and this loophole in the exit procedure from the castle became clear, as Eggers explains, the gateway was sealed up.**

'At nine o'clock on the evening of January 5th, 1942, with snow falling heavily outside, Lieutenant Luteyn of the Dutch East Indies Army and I, dressed as "German officers", broke into a loft above the guardhouse which adjoined the prisoners' quarters. Softly we descended a stone spiral staircase, past the door of the German Officers' Mess on the first floor. The strains of *Lili Marlene* muffled our footsteps. On the ground floor we passed the guardroom itself where, though I did not know it until after the war, was pinned on the wall the police photograph taken after my first attempt. In bitter cold and driving snow, the sentries posted along the causeway mistook us for visiting German officers. We reached the drawbridge of the castle, opened the wicket gate which I had noticed on my way to the town jail, then climbed into the moat and up the far bank. Beyond was a high paling, bordering a park where the prisoners exercised, which we climbed, and sliding down a steep grass slope, reached the twelve foot outer wall of the castle.

'It was difficult to get a foothold, until standing on Luteyn's shoulders, I was able to grasp the icy coping and hoist him beside me. We landed heavily on the frozen ground and buried our German officers' overcoats and caps made from Dutch Home Army uniforms, in the deep snow. Within ten minutes of our escape from the guardhouse we set forth in a curious mixture of converted uniform jackets and RAF trousers with ski caps made from blankets to pass as Dutch electrical workers . . . '

The absence of the first two prisoners was covered up at the roll-calls the next day, and the following night the operation was repeated when Lieutenants Donkers and Hyde-Thompson got through the gates only to be recaptured at Ulm.

*Left:* **Down the path to the steps to the moat.** *Right:* **Once in the park, they scaled the wall about here. (David Ray) Although Donkers and Hyde-Thompson got no further than Ulm railway station, Luteyn and Neave reached Switzerland just 72 hours after leaving Colditz. Neave finally arrived back in England four months later having travelled through France and Spain to Gibraltar. His was the first British home run and the first of three successful operations from the castle in 1942.**



**The loss of the almost foolproof 'Neave' route really came about by accident for the security staff were actually searching for the long-running tunnelling operation which they knew was under way, if not already completed, and which they thought might well have been used for the latest escapes. The French tunnel was a major civil engineering project which had been going on for eight months, 24 hours a day. It was the brainchild of nine men: Captain Edgar Barras, Jean Bréjoux, Lieutenant Bernard Cazamayou, Lieutenant Jean Gambero, Lieutenant Léone Godfrin, Lieutenant 'Fredo' Guignes, Lieutenant Roger Madin and Lieutenant J. Paillie. On March 18, 1941, Paillie and Cazamayou had been caught tunnelling in the cellar of the yard clock tower which adjoined their quarters (*left* and page 7). The Germans had promptly sealed up the doorways on each of the four floors leading to the tower from the spiral staircase and no doubt assumed that would be the end of the matter. In reality it was only the beginning. By sealing up the tower the Germans had inadvertently provided a secure location where work could go on indefinitely. Having found a way back into the top of the clock tower, the Société Anonyme du Tunnel de Colditz — the SATC — recommenced work in the place where a tunnel entrance would be least suspected — in the roof! *Right:* This is the attic above the French quarters today, i.e. the rooms above the sick bay and parcels office on the plan on pages 4–5. This was also where most of the tons of rock and sand were hidden.**

The escape route from the theatre had been discovered and blocked by the security staff on January 13; two days later they achieved an even greater success when the origin of the French tunnel was uncovered. Reinhold Eggers describes how they found it:

'My private Search Committee met again. Had we really been over every single surface, up or down or sideways, in every single unoccupied space in the Schloss? We crossed off the attics, theatre, cellars — and our minds wandered round the rooms, floors, landings, corridors, buttresses and entrances that we knew so well.

'Suddenly I thought of the clock tower in the north-west corner of the yard, at the corner where the north, or chapel side of the yard met the west block, or Kellerhaus. On the ground floor of the Cellarhouse were the parcel office and stores, and the infirmary. Above, on 1st, 2nd, 3rd and top floors were the French company. Over a year previously we'd found two French officers digging at the very bottom of the tower. We had therefore bricked up the doors giving access to the floorings inside this tower — one on each floor level. The clock weights used to hang down inside through holes in the tower floors, but the clock had never worked in our time, and the weights and cables had been removed by our Security Officer in 1940. We had never, now we thought it over, looked inside this vertical shaft. The top was sealed off with beams. We'd often stood on them in the attic. I arranged an inspection of the clock tower for January 15th. That morning I sent Oberstabsfeldwebel Gephard to the top of the tower to get a couple of beams off and shine a light down below. Gephard moved two beams from the top of the shaft and saw a light and heard movement down below. He looked down the canvas pipe, down which the clock weights used to hang, passing through holes in the landings in the tower. He had a boy with him expressly to lower down this shaft. The boy went down the rope and immediately started to shout: "There's someone here."

'Three French officers were down there, caught in the act, shifting rubble. Fifty feet above ground we'd found the way down into their tunnel. The French terrified the boy on his rope with threats, while they bashed their way out through a half brick side wall. Gephard sent for help. He couldn't fire down the shaft because of the boy and we hadn't even put guards on each of the three floor exits from the tower landings which we had bricked up in 1941. There seemed no point in

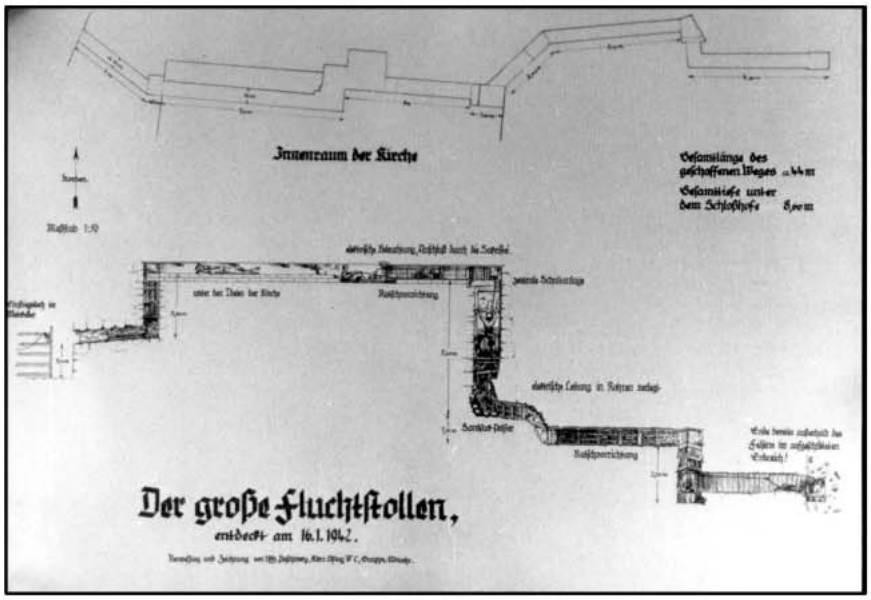
**The stairs in the corner provided access to the attic of the clock tower itself. Part of the mechanism is still in place.**

**The SATC began by dropping down the shafts where the clock weights originally hung.** *Left:* **A thick layer of forty years accumulation of pigeon droppings had to be scraped away before the entrance was revealed.** *Right:* **Following standard practice, on its discovery on January 15, 1942, Lange took several pictures along its length. We can see his feet in this shot as he looks down from one of the floors in the tower.**

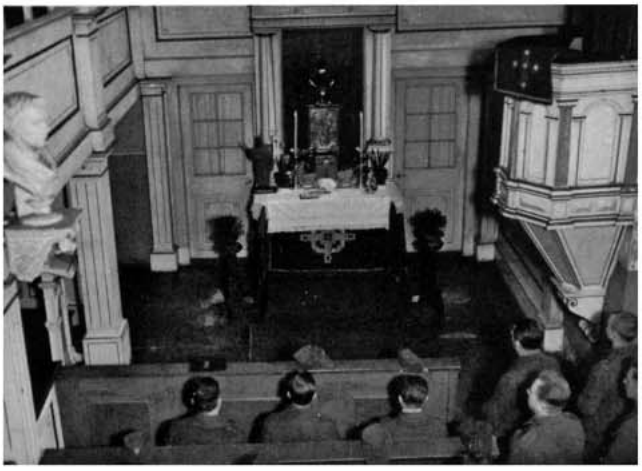
that. The French burst through into a bathroom, actually into a bath, and escaped.

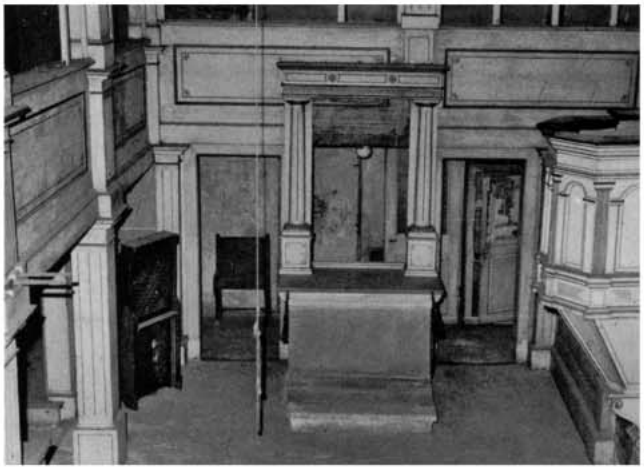
'I was told all this after I had hurried over from my quarters and had gone up to see what Gephard had discovered. I had the lowest door into the shaft broken open. We climbed in and looked up through the holes in the floors. A vertical approach again, like the hole down from the stage! Stacks of treasure trove fell into our hands — tools, clothes, but only, alas, twenty-three marks in German money. Still, we had found the start of the tunnel. It began, of all places, right at the top of the building — hardly the place to look for an underground tunnel! But still we hadn't found the main run of the prisoners' tunnel — only the start of it. They got into this vertical shaft which we had, in effect, presented them with a year previously, by moving the beams at the top, and then what? They got down to the bottom of the shaft and into the cellar by this simple, unobserved way. But from somewhere in the cellar there must be a horizontal shaft. We went down and looked around. There was no hole anywhere in the floor or in the walls.

'I left a sentry down in the cellar and went off to report and think. The sentry was a bright lad. He got a hammer and tapped away at every square foot of all the four walls of that cellar and the floor as well, and in the end he found a loose square of stonework and there, behind it, was the entrance to the tunnel.



**Once the tunnellers had dropped down to the cellar (*left*), they began to cut a shaft horizontally through the wall facing the chapel, hoping to break through into the crypt. After digging a distance of 15 feet with no sign of any vault, they turned upwards until they reached the timbers supporting the chapel floor. The entrance from the wine cellar was concealed by a pivoting door made from original masonry from the wall.** *Right:* **Walter Teichmann told us that he believed the tunnel was never filled in but only closed at its beginning. If so the entrance lies beyond this wall.**





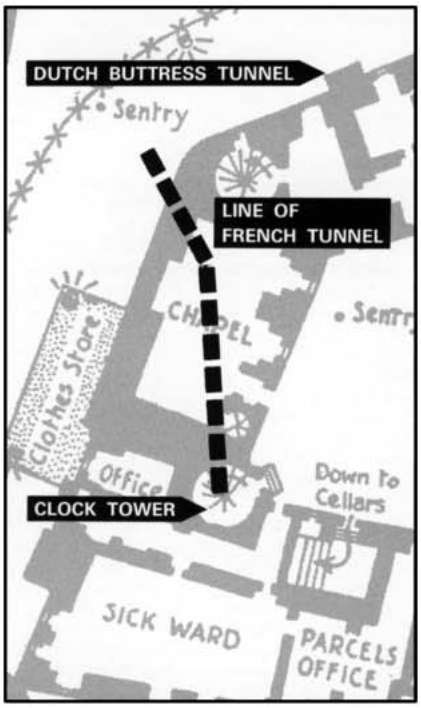
**The shaft then ran diagonally under the chapel, from the lower right to top left in this picture. Seven massive beams had to be cut through using saws made from kitchen knives but, with still no contact with a vault, the SATC company realised that they would have to make a slight change in alignment to come out under the north-east terrace below the wire. Efforts were redoubled by bringing in an additional 21 men to work around the clock. An elaborate look-out system was maintained to signal the approach of any guards, Abbé Jean-Jean also holding regular prayer meetings which tended to encourage the Germans to leave the chapel alone.**

'But this horizontal shaft did not run north by the shortest route to outside the wire. It went due east under the chapel. Great iron-hard and centuries-old supporting beams under the chapel floor had been sawn right through. A single-track line and trolley served to bring back the rubble from the working face to the foot of the tower up which it was hauled to the roof and disposed of under the attics, as we knew. An electric lighting and signalling system had been installed. this was run from the circuit in the sacristy and was controlled from there when necessary, under cover of the "religious and cultural ceremonies" which we had so foolishly permitted six months previously. Why had they gone east under the chapel, and not the shortest way out — due north? We thought they had suspected a crypt.

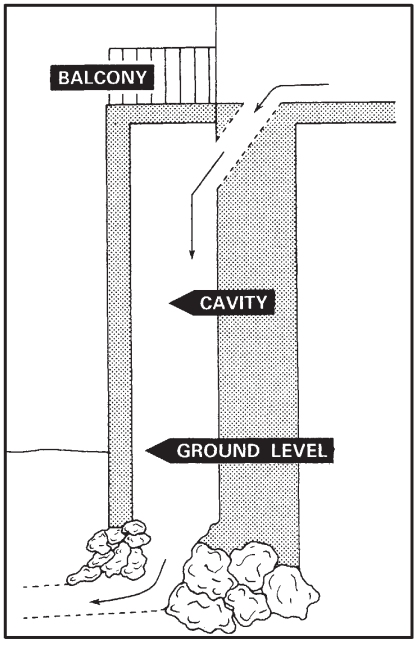
'At the end of the chapel, the tunnel went down vertically for more than twenty feet to get under the foundations, and then out again towards the steep slope of the park. I crawled to the end and right out to the working face. Over my head I could just hear, now and then, the sentries marching up and down. There were only about thirty more feet to go. The earth was soft and easy to work. We were only just in time.'

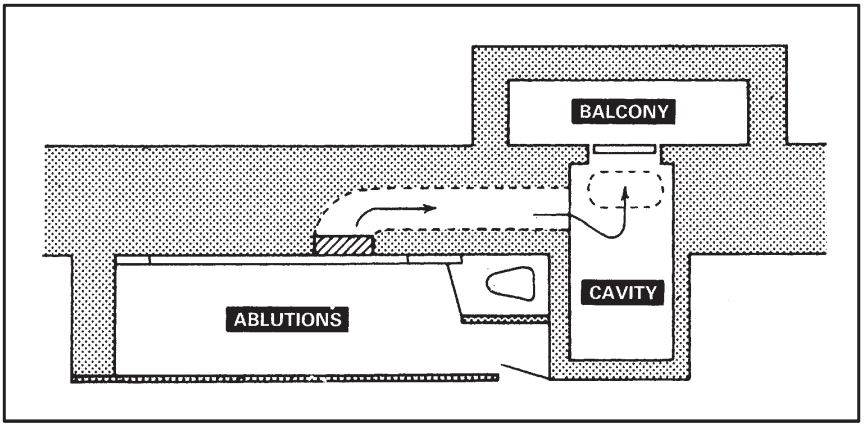
In the first nine months of 1942 there were no more escapes which resulted in home runs but there were many unsuccessful attempts. A variety of methods were used including a British tunnel dug through the thick snow on one of the roofs, and another leading from the Dutch urinals. Unfortunately when the latter was discovered, the second of the two the dummies used to cover up the earlier escapes at the roll-calls was found, together with a considerable stock of made-up German uniforms and civilian clothes.

The run of bad luck for the prisoners was broken in September by a cheeky operation involving an exit made from what was hoped would be the least obvious place to look: inside the German RSM's office! Oberstabsfeldwebel Gephard's office was located off a corridor leading to the sick ward on the



**Removal of the debris — up to a ton per shift — required an additional chain gang of over twenty; by Christmas there was less than 20 yards to go. It was the intention of the SATC that after the founder members had got away, anyone else could use the tunnel, and some 200 prepared themselves for the biggest break in PoW history. Then early in January came a bombshell when 31 French officers, including some of the tunnellers, were arbitrarily transferred to another camp. Were the Germans getting close? Five more days passed before Gephard made his unwelcome discovery. The OKW were so cock-a-hoop at the revelation that the Gauleiter of Saxony, Martin Mutschmann, made a personal visit to Colditz the following day. Here he is seen (fourth from left) emerging from the door on the eastern side of the courtyard which housed the 'Prominente' — the captured VIPs who were being held in close confinement on Hitler's orders as possible hostages.**




**Another high-level 'tunnel' — discovered just a month later — ran down a buttress on the outer face of the Dutch quarters. It was discovered to be hollow and to extend several feet below ground level. The entrance ran from a urinal alongside the balcony where the opening through the splash back could be camouflaged with tar paint. However the Germans suspected the buttress might be hollow and, at the end of February 1942, smashed their own entrance through lower down. Two Dutch officers were caught inside: 1st Luitenant Gerrit Dames and Cadet Jacques Hageman and also 'Moritz'. This is Hageman's PoW record card 'liberated' at the end of the war, recording his consequent period of solitary confinement from '9.3 to 6.4.42'.**

Personalkarte I: Personelle Angaben

Kriegsgefangenen-Stammlager: Oflag 67 Oflag VI A

Name: HAGEMAN.

Vorname: Jacques, Hajo

Geburtstag und -ort: 3.8.18. Kerkrade

Religion: Prot.

Staatsangehörigkeit: Holländer

Dienstgrad: Ober fähnr.

Truppenteil: Kpl. Mil. Aufs Komp. usw.:

Zivilberuf: Akt.-Off. Berufs-Gr.: 0

Matrikel Nr. (Stammrolle des Heimatstaates):

Gefangennahme (Ort und Datum): Kap. Haarlem 14.5.40.

Ob gesund, krank, verwundet eingeliefert: gesund

Lichtbild

Nähere Personalbeschreibung

Größe: 1.85 Haarfarbe: Blond

Besondere Kennzeichen: Narbe

Augen: Blau

1023

Fingerabdruck des rechten Zeigefingers

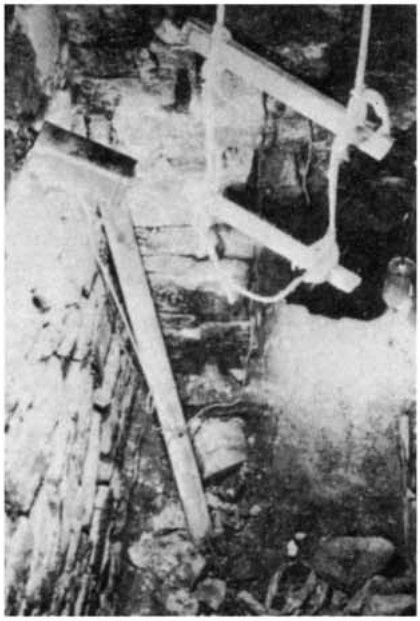
Name und Anschrift der zu benachrichtigenden Person in der Heimat des Kriegsgefangenen

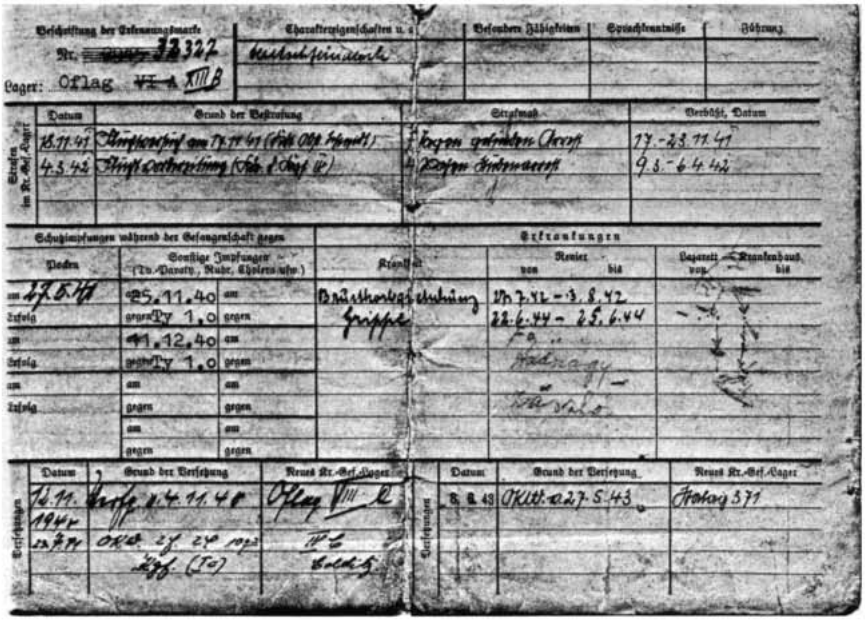
Familie J. Kilian

Joseph Israelspl. 4

den Haag

Wenden!





Beschäftigung der Erkennungsmarke Nr. 33327

Lager: Oflag XIII B

Charaktereigenschaften u. s.

Besondere Fähigkeiten

Sprachkenntnisse

Führung

Strafen im Kr.-Gef.-Lager

| Datum | Grund der Bestrafung | Strafmaß | Verbüßt, Datum |
|---|---|---|---|
| 18.11.41 | Ungehorsam am 17.11.41 (Fall Obf. Hagedt.) | 7 Tagen gelindem Arrest | 17.-23.11.41 |
| 4.3.42 | Flucht versucht (Kdo. d. Chef d.) | 21 Tagen Strafarrest | 9.3.-6.4.42 |

Schutzimpfungen während der Gefangenschaft gegen

Pocken: 25.11.40 gegen

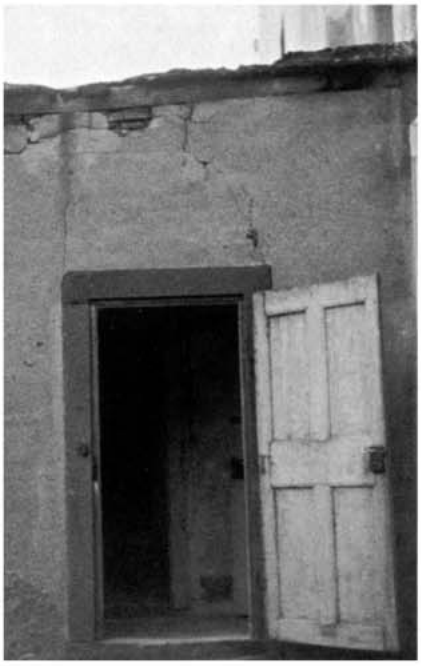
Sonstige Impfungen (Ty.-Paraty., Ruhr, Cholera usw.): Ty 1.0 gegen 41.12.40 gegen Ty 1.0 gegen

Erkrankungen

| Krankheit | Revier von | Revier bis | Lazarett / Krankenhaus von | Lazarett / Krankenhaus bis |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Brechdurchfall Grippe | 17.7.42 | 3.8.42 | | |
| | 22.6.44 | 25.6.44 | | |

Versetzungen

| Datum | Grund der Versetzung | Neues Kr.-Gef.-Lager |
|---|---|---|
| 16.11.1942 | Verlegung | Oflag VIII B |
| 3.8.43 | OKW/WA 27.5.43 | Hohenlychen |



**It is always nice to add an extra touch of authenticity and these pictures illustrating the part-successful store room escape in September 1942 were actually taken by Captain Kenneth Lockwood when he returned to Colditz in 1986.** *Left:* **The clothing store backed onto the German Regimental Sergeant Major's office, judged to be the one place which would be least suspected to begin a tunnel.** *Right:* **Once in the store, it was planned that a party of six men would calmly walk out of the door, masquerading as a Polish working party, and simply walk up to the park gate.**

north-west corner of the prisoners' yard. It was to be a 'Blitz' attempt carried out quickly over as few days as possible to reduce the risk of detection.

For obvious reasons the digging could only be carried out at night after Gephard had departed. Pat Reid and Lieutenant Derek Gill did the work after having carefully removed the floorboards from underneath the RSM's desk. The plan was to cut diagonally through into a clothing storehouse which had been built backing onto the outside of the northern wall of the castle. This would then enable the escapers to emerge early one morning dressed as Polish orderlies who regularly transported materials to and from the store and the town.

On the first night sufficient progress was made to reach the inside of the plaster on the storeroom wall. The following night involved enlarging the hole sufficiently to allow six men to pass through quickly, but the final break though the plaster was to be left until the actual attempt.

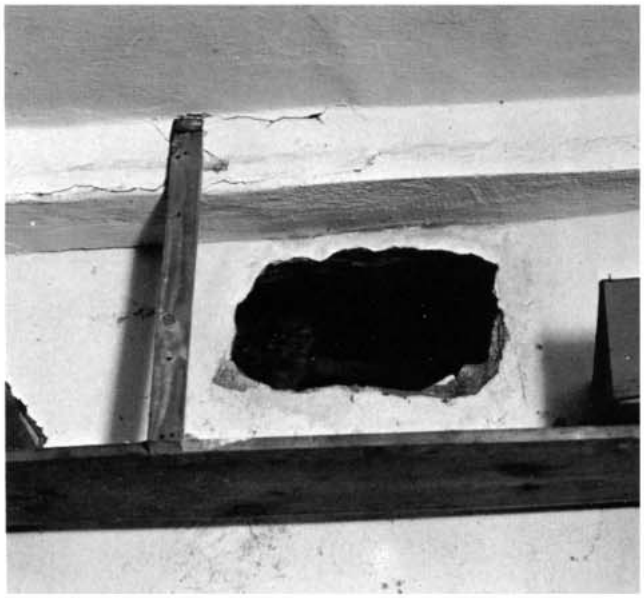
The combined Anglo-Dutch escape comprised three pairs: Lieutenants Herman Donkers and Geoffrey Wardle; Lieutenants Ted Beets and W. T. 'Lulu' Lawton; and Flight Lieutenant H. N. 'Bill' Fowler with Luitenant ter Zee Damiaen J. van Doorninck, who would masquerade as the German NCO in charge of the detail.

The escape was mounted on the morning of September 9, the party emerging shortly after a guard change at 7.00 a.m. when it was hoped the new sentry would assume the party had gone to the store just before he had come on duty. Two large packing cases, assembled from dismountable sections which had been passed through the tunnel, were carried by the party to help the disguise.

At 7.10 a.m. the party emerged and walked up the path which led to the gate. It all looked so natural that the NCO on duty obligingly opened the gate, later receiving a rocket for not having asked to see their passes.

Although the group was seen by the prisoners on look-out to have successfully negotiated all obstacles, there was still one vital one yet to come which only they could achieve — the roll-call cover up. With only an hour's start, something had to be done to stop the absences being discovered for as long as possible, but by now most of the ruses which had been used in the past were well worn, and the Dutch dummies were no more. It was therefore planned to try to delay the holding of the 8.00 a.m. 'Appell' by feigning an outbreak of sickness which would prevent many officers from leaving their bunks. In addition, four more officers would be hidden away in the hope that the Germans might then assume ten men to have escaped, leaving these 'ghosts' to reappear

**Where the hole from Gephard's office debouched inside the store room.** *Left* **Lange in 1942.** *Right:* **Lockwood 44 years later.**



**When the Germans restaged the escape, real Polish orderlies were brought in to stand in for Luitenant Beets, Lieutenant Lawton, Lieutenant Wardle and Flight Lieutenant Fowler. Luitenant ter Zee van Doorninck, who spoke fluent German, played the part of a senior NCO and Luitenant Donkers a private. (This picture also gives one of the best illustrations of the style of the wooden palisade fence which surrounded the sheep pen in the park.) The operation resulted in a successful home run for van Doorninck and Fowler who reached Switzerland after an 87-hour journey across Germany. This brought the Dutch level-pegging with the French in the home run table with six each. Britain lagged with only two . . . but not for long.**

after future escapes to make up the numbers. Hauptmann Eggers takes up the story of that Wednesday morning:

'At 9 o'clock a report came through that a woman from Commichau, coming to market in Colditz through the Tiergarten above the park, had found two boxes with Polish uniforms in them. We looked at each other. "That's why there's all this trouble this morning."

'At 9.15 we went into the yard with reinforcements. To begin with, ten officers seemed to be missing. We got that number down to six. Then I found two British officers standing in with the Dutch company. We checked the Dutch from their photographs, and found three of them absent. . . . We now found that five British officers were missing. But one of them, surely, I had just seen in the yard. We were in some confusion.

'To make this even more confounded, we had something desperately serious to worry about now. We discovered that our basic security check, tallying identities of appearance in the flesh with appearance in photographs, was not infallible. I pulled out the identity card of Lieutenant Keillar, and called him forward. I looked from face to photo and back again. "Who are you?"

' "Lieutenant Malcolm Keillar — Number 310."

'I looked at his identity disc. It tallied. I asked him for the personal details on his card — birthday, father's Christian name, and so on. He couldn't give them.

' "Give me your real name. You are required to do that under the Geneva Convention." He said he had orders not to tell. I pressed him. He asked to speak to his Senior Officer, and finally claimed to be a Corporal Hendeen, whom we had, we thought, transferred two months ago to a soldiers' camp in Silesia with several other British orderlies. It turned out that Keillar had changed places with him, and the corporal had been living in Colditz for eight weeks under an assumed identity!

'We collected Lieutenant Keillar later on, pleased to have got something out of the confusion of that day. But still, the price of this discovery, that our security check, the final one, was not as good as it should have been, was highly disturbing.

'By the end of the morning we found that six officers in all were missing. However, Lieutenants Donkers and Wardle, RN, were brought back the same morning, and next day Lieutenants Lawton and Beets also returned. The two others, Flight Lieutenant Fowler and Luitenant ter Zee van Doorninck, got to Switzerland.'

After this escape a major review of all security measures was undertaken. A central museum was established by the OKW in Vienna where escape methods used in various camps — not only in the Colditz 'Escape Academy' — could be demonstrated and the variety of escape implements and equipment recovered put on display. Camp Security Officers could thereby learn from others' mistakes and the Colditz Kommandant returned with several new ideas to block possible loopholes.

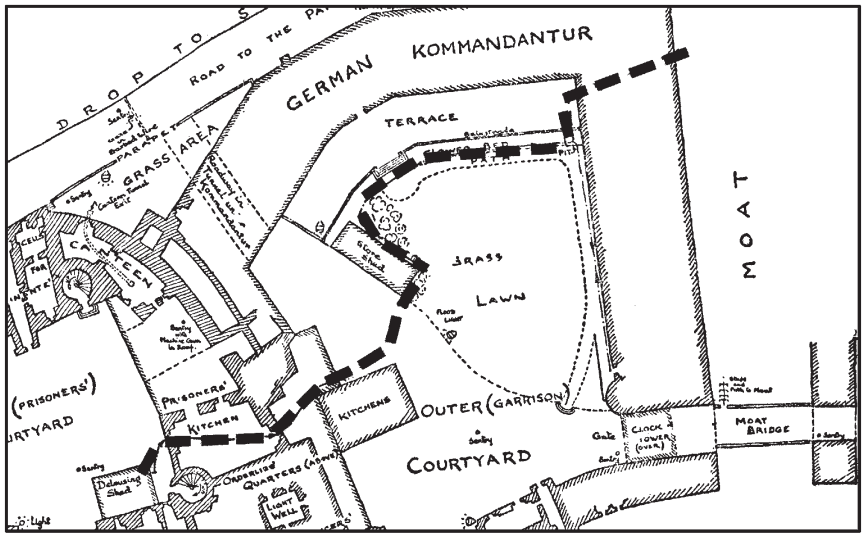
'We put up a "pagoda" or machine gun tower in the north-west corner of the terrace', recalled Eggers, 'giving a sight down most of the northern and western sides. We also put up a catwalk running in mid-air well out from the outer wall of the approach yard, covering the fifty yards of the Saalhaus buildings, plus two buttress-type buildings standing out at each end, namely the archway with its cells, from which two escapes had already been made, and the guardroom. It was down the front of this guardroom, the sheer face of about eighty feet high, that Lieutenants Chmiel and Surmanowicz had slid on their rope over eighteen months earlier. On the park or east side of the castle we put a sentry up on a catwalk over the barbed wire gateway to supplement the sentry whose beat ended at the gate. This also gave a better view of the ground floor windows in the prisoners' quarters, as it was now possible to watch what had been dead ground. Furthermore, we decided to face the wall surface in the passageway that ran along the back of our quarters (overlooking the prisoners' yard), with an alarm net of wires.

'Every week we used to receive a publication called *Das Abwehrblatt* (Security News) from the OKW, telling of escape methods in all the different camps. Alas that our own reports should have appeared in it so often! It was fascinating reading. Prisoners seemed to find it best to be conspicuous in a normal way, rather than to try to be nervously inconspicuous. One man, apparently, had gone all the way to Switzerland disguised as a chimney-sweep. During the First War, I heard, a prisoner had pushed a wheelbarrow all the way to freedom.'

**The 'Reid' escape — one of the Colditz classics. The basic idea revolved around trying to get into the tall Kommandantur building on the south side of the German part of the castle. From here it was hoped it was possible to climb down a rope from the outer windows, down into the moat, so joining up with Neave's route of nine months previous. The doorway into this block was in full view of the sentry in the German courtyard although the door itself was in shadow. Fifteen yards away by the terrace was a sort of pit which offered some concealment before reaching the door. One encouragement was that Flying Officer Dominic Bruce had managed to get away from one of the windows on this side on September 8 having hidden inside a tea chest packing case before the Germans carried it up to the attic. His rope can be seen hanging from the window on the left. Although Bruce had been caught a week later, the knowledge he brought back confirmed that the windows on the outside were unbarred and that the top rooms were unoccupied.**

The next successful home run involved Pat Reid himself who had relinquished his position as escape officer in order to make his own bid for freedom. On the morning of October 15 four British officers were found to be missing: Major R. B. Littledale, Captain Reid, Lieutenant-Commander W. E. Stephens and Flight Lieutenant H. D. Wardle (a different Wardle to the one in the Gephard office escape). The only clue immediately apparent was some bed sheets found under some bushes, but the dogs could only follow the trail back as far as the castle wall on the southern side backing onto the Kommandantur. A search inside revealed some English toffee papers in a cellar leading to an air shaft on the same wall, but the duct was so narrow that it could hardly have been used by a fully-grown man. Also it would have been necessary to break into the German courtyard, which was floodlit and cross it in the full view of the patrolling sentry, an operation which Security deemed impossible. The sweet papers were assumed to have been dropped by one of their own men, eating them surreptitiously in the cellar.

It was a worrying state of affairs as all four officers were not picked up by security checks elsewhere; it was as if they had just vanished by some Houdini conjuring trick.




**The route by which it was planned to reach the south wing was rather complicated and this drawing will help follow the story easier. It began in the corner of the prisoners' yard where access was gained to the kitchens. Reproduced *below* are Major Reid's own annotations showing how the delousing shed gave an element of cover before they reached the window with its broken pane.**

Once inside the kitchens, the party comprising Reid, Major Littledale, Lieutenant-Commander Stephens and Flight Lieutenant Wardle, with Squadron Leader McColm in a supportive rôle to clear all traces afterwards, went up to the windows overlooking the German yard. Here a window bar had already been loosened sufficiently to permit a man to climb through. We asked Major Reid which window they used. He indicated two possibilities, favouring number 1.

After dropping down from the flat roof, they had to cross the German yard across the direct path of the patrolling sentry. It had been arranged for music to be played in one of the rooms which overlooked the courtyard where the conductor, Douglas Bader, could watch the sentry. The music would then be stopped every time it was clear to cross. However, this plan misfired and each man had to run the gauntlet, in the full glare of the floodlights, when the sentry's back was turned.

From there the route ran in front of the Kommandantur terrace from left to right to the 'pit' by the doorway. Major Reid comments that the he does not think either the privet hedge or the steps were there at the time as a flower bed and path ran right along in front of the terrace (see plan).

'The pit,' Major Reid explains, 'was more like a big manhole opening with a hatch cover — like a pub barrel hatch but with a cement ledge. The cover was horizontal, not slanting as it is now, and half-open. The flower bed was where the wood is stacked in the photo. I don't remember the two doors. It was while we were lying there that a German officer walked round the corner.'

Pat Reid described what happened next in *The Colditz Story*: 'My next job was to try to open the door of the building, the one from which Bruce escaped. The door was fifteen yards away; it was in deep shadow, though the area between the door and the pit was only in semi-darkness. Again watching the sentry, I crept carefully to the door, and then started work with a set of *passe-partout* keys I had brought with me. I had one unnerving interruption, when I heard Priem's voice in the distance returning from the town. I had just sufficient time to creep back to the pit and hide, before he came around the corner. We laughed inwardly as he passed by us along the path, talking loudly to another officer. I could not help thinking of the occasion when he stood outside Gephard's office and did not have the door unlocked!' [The store room escape, page 32.] 'It was 11 p.m. when Priem passed by. I worked for an hour on the door without success and finally gave up. We were checked, and would have to find another exit. We felt our way along the tunnel leading from the pit under the veranda, and after eight yards came to a large cellar with a low arched ceiling supported on pillars. It had something to do with sewage, for Hank, at one point, stepped off solid ground and nearly fell into what might have been deep water! He must have disturbed a scum on top of the liquid because a dreadful stench arose. When I was well away from the entrance, I struck a match. There was a solitary wheelbarrow for furniture, and at the far end of the cavern-like cellar, a chimney flue.'

**'I had previously noticed a faint glimmer of light from this direction,' wrote Pat Reid. 'Examining the flue, I found it was an air vent which led vertically upwards from the ceiling of the cavern for about four feet, and then curved outwards towards the fresh air. Hank pushed me up the flue. In plan it was about nine inches by three feet. I managed to wriggle myself high enough to see around the curve. The flue ended at the vertical face of a wall two feet away from me as a barred opening shaped like a letter-box slot. The opening was at the level of the ground outside, and was situated on the far side of the building — the moat side for which we were heading, but it was a practical impossibility to negotiate this flue. There were bars, and in any case only a pigmy could have wriggled round the curve.' Nevertheless with no alternative, Pat decided to try again: 'This time I removed some of my clothing and found I could slide more easily up the shaft. I examined the bars closely and found one was loose in its mortar socket. I succeeded in loosening one end of the bar and bent it nearly double. Slipping down into the cellar again, I whispered to the others: "There's a vague chance we may be able to squeeze through the flue. Anyway, it's worth trying. We shall have to strip completely naked." After a tremendous struggle, I succeeded in squeezing through the chimney and sallied forth**

**naked on to the path outside. Bending down into the flue again, I could just reach Hank's hand as he passed me up my clothes and my suitcase, and then his own. I hid the kit in some bushes near the path and put on enough dark clothing to make me inconspicuous. Hank was stripped and struggling in the hole with his back towards me. I managed to grab one arm and heaved, while he was pushed from below. Inch by inch he advanced and at the end of twenty minutes, with a last wrench, I pulled him clear. During all that time we were at the mercy of any passer-by. What a spectacle it must have been — a naked man being squeezed through a hole in the wall like toothpaste out of a tube!'**

Whatever the breach in security was, it must still be there and could no doubt be used again with impunity. The only credible theory was that it was a repeat of the theatre escape route down through the guardroom although a new sentry position had been established to try to block that exit. It was a mystery that was only revealed to Hauptmann Eggers when he read Pat Reid's book on his release from Soviet detention in 1956. In 1974, when visitors were allowed to revisit Colditz for the first time since the war, Pat Reid was taken back to the castle by the BBC *Radio Times* to demonstrate that it *was* possible to squeeze through the impossible ventilation duct — if one was naked!

With all four men having reached Switzerland, it was a resounding finale to Reid's tenure at Colditz and the castle's peak year for escapes. By the year's end, Eggers' records showed that 44 attempts had been made by 84 prisoners, Britain, France and Holland each achieving 6 home runs. Although the security staff could claim to have caught 39 of those attempting to leave the castle in the act, with many others being returned to Colditz after being rounded up elsewhere, Oflag IVC had hardly achieved the escape-proof status for which it had originally been set up.

The fallacy of concentrating so much escape expertise under one roof — the Colditz Escape Academy as it was being called — meant that something had to be done. That something had to be dispersal, and during 1943 the unique international aspect of the camp ceased. The Dutch were transferred to Stanislau in Poland on June 8, 1943, and the French and Belgian companies to Lübeck in the north on July 7 and 12 respectively. The Poles were moved out to Spitzberg in Silesia in August. Thereafter Colditz became an Oflag for some 180 British PoWs, losing its Sonderlager status although enjoying a special position in view of the VIP hostages — the Prominenten — who were held there.

Officers still attempted to escape, but the increasing sophistication of the defences, which included hidden microphones, had made it an unequal battle compared with the early days. Most loopholes had now been sealed and no more successful home runs were achieved.

**All four men managed to get clear of the castle and all four reached the safety of Switzerland, shooting Britain to equal Holland and France at the top of the escape league table with six home runs. Although no one could foresee it at the time, it was to be the last successful escape from Colditz. There were many other attempts, one being the masterly disguise of Lieutenant A. Perodeau (*left*) just under three months later when he doubled for the camp electrician, Willi Pöhnert. *Right:* Now in the evening of their lives, Major Reid meets Willi in the courtyard they both knew so well. (via Michael Booker)**

**Another Colditz classic — the clever impersonation of Stabsfeldwebel 'Franz Josef' Rothenberger (*left*). *Right:* It began here in the castle sick bay.**

Two notable attempts by Lieutenant Mike Sinclair of the King's Royal Rifle Corps have their special place in the years which followed. Sinclair had made so many escape attempts that his photograph had been circulated to police stations throughout the Reich and the Germans themselves had dubbed him Der Rote Fuchs — the Red Fox. Even Hauptmann Eggers calls him the greatest escaper of all, recalling that 'his first escape being from a camp in north-east Germany. It led him through Poland, Slovakia, Hungary and Yugoslavia, until he was caught on the Bulgarian frontier. He was then transferred to Colditz, escaping for a short time while on the way. His third attempt, from Leipzig Hospital, ended in Cologne. By then he was known to our guard company as the Red Fox.

'Sinclair's fourth attempt ended in south Germany and both at Weinsberg and on the way back, he tried again to get away.

'His seventh attempt, disguised as Stabsfeldwebel Rothenberger, nick-named "Franz Josef", in September 1943 nearly came off, and with him would have gone a mass break-out in grand style. This was the time he was shot at point-blank range and by sheerest luck escaped alive.

'An eighth attempt, over the west terrace at Colditz in January 1944 one evening, got him as far as the Dutch frontier.

**Situated on the north-west corner of the castle, its windows (*left*), although barred, let down between the corner tower and the clothing store (*below left*) onto a fairly secluded terrace. From there the steps led down to the path (*below right*) which continued on towards the sentry gate. Lieutenant Mike Sinclair, whose escaping exploits had already earned him the accolade 'The Red Fox' by the Germans, was to play Franz Josef while Captain Lance Pope and Lieutenant John Hyde-Thompson would be dressed as guards. The plan was to march up the path as bold as brass, just as the real Rothenberger did on guard changes, and relieve the sentries on the gate. If successful another 30 prisoners would follow in the biggest breakout Colditz had ever seen. After many weeks of preparation, FJ-Day was fixed for Thursday, September 2, 1943 when a particularly dumb guard was expected to be on duty.**

'By the summer of 1944 the war could only go one way, but perhaps Sinclair felt that captivity was a disgrace, even though by that time it had practically lost its meaning.

'On September 25th the walk was down in the park — moving around and chatting in groups, in the afternoon sun. The leaves were just turning on the trees, preparing once again the finest view in Colditz, when

**As it turned out the guard on the gate was more astute than he had been given credit for. Reaching this spot, just before the path met the tunnel under the Kommandantur, Sinclair ordered the two men on duty to return to the guardroom. The sentry on the catwalk above the gate obeyed, but the other man stood his ground and asked to see the guard commander's pass. This, it transpired, was the wrong colour and the guard promptly pressed his alarm. As Sinclair was berating the German for his insubordination, a corporal and two men arrived hot-foot from the guardhouse. Drawing his side arm, the corporal demanded 'Franz Josef's' weapon. There was a struggle, a shot rang out, and Sinclair dropped to the ground, wounded in the chest.**

Fake German Officer's cap.

**The dummy rifle carried by Lance Pope, and the fake cap worn by Mike Sinclair were taken from the museum when Colditz was liberated in April 1945 and, now form part of Michael Booker's large collection of Colditz and escape memorabilia.**

**On September 25, 1944, in his final desperate bid for freedom, Mike Sinclair threw caution to the winds in his near-suicidal break in the park. After scaling the wire, he ran this way . . . between the pond and the brook . . . a mad dash of more than 100 yards with the guards blazing away. Suddenly he tumbled . . . a bullet had found its mark . . . and the Fox lay dead.** *Right:* **Michael Booker seeks out the spot where he died . . . now Sinclair lies at rest in Charlottenburg War Cemetery in West Berlin.**

seen from the eastern windows overlooking the valley, with hornbeams, beeches and sycamores flaming away up through the Tiergarten out of sight to the south-east.

'Suddenly, without warning or any foreknowledge among those present, Lieutenant Sinclair broke away from a small group walking round inside the wire. He sprang across the trip-wire and reached the main fence. Up over it he went, his thick gloves helping him to grip in spite of the barbed wire. Down he came on the other side.

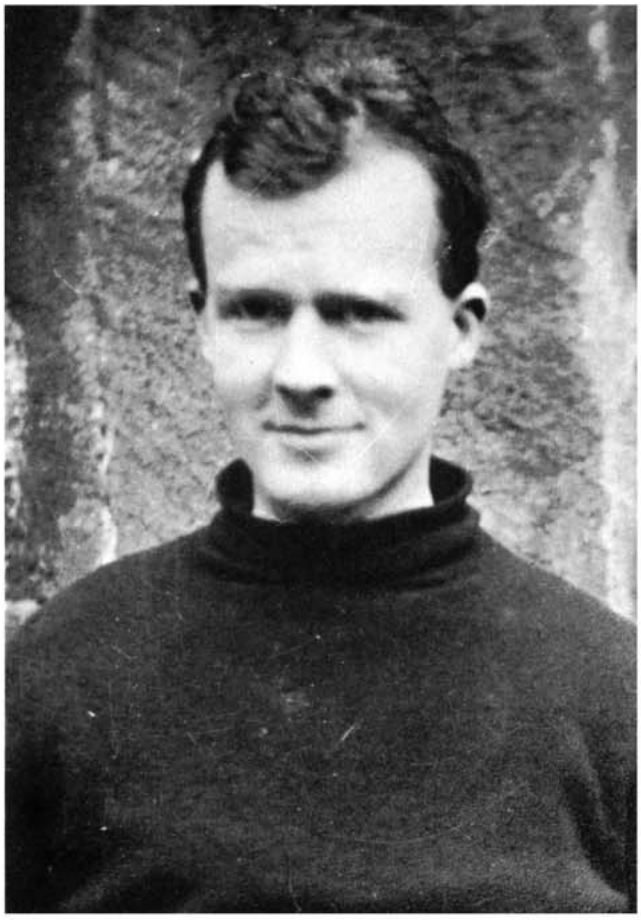
'An NCO close by shouted to him to stop. His revolver misfired. Sinclair ran forward down the ravine to where 150 yards away the stream ran through a grid under the foot of the ten-foot park wall. He could not climb this wall. He could not get through the grid. What could he have hoped to do?

'Several sentries opened fire. Even then, the shot that killed Michael Sinclair was not aimed true. Fate seemed to hold just one more chance in store. But just as one year previously a bullet from three-foot range had glanced off Sinclair's ribs and out of his body, this time the bullet glanced off his elbow and inwards to his heart. He died instantaneously — "Shot whilst escaping."

'He was doing his duty as he saw it — our men were doing theirs. There was no dispute this time over the shooting. Sinclair was buried in the military cemetery at Colditz with full honours.

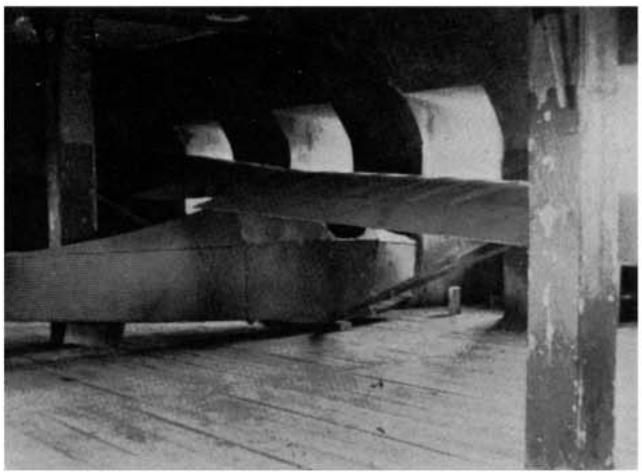
'Whatever his secondary motives, it was plain to all that, for him, the highest was that of service, to regain which in full right and duty Lieutenant Sinclair felt he must at all costs get back to England by his own efforts. The number of his escapes, the distances covered, the variety and ingenuity resorted to and displayed, the thoroughness of preparation and the exactness of execution, all added up to unparalleled accomplishment and example.

'If there is indeed a Valhalla, for the heroes of whatever nation,' wrote Eggers in 1961, 'if the men who go there are men of courage and daring, if their determination springs from one true motive alone and if that motive is love of their country — then in our own German tradition, Valhalla is the resting-place of Lieutenant Michael Sinclair.'

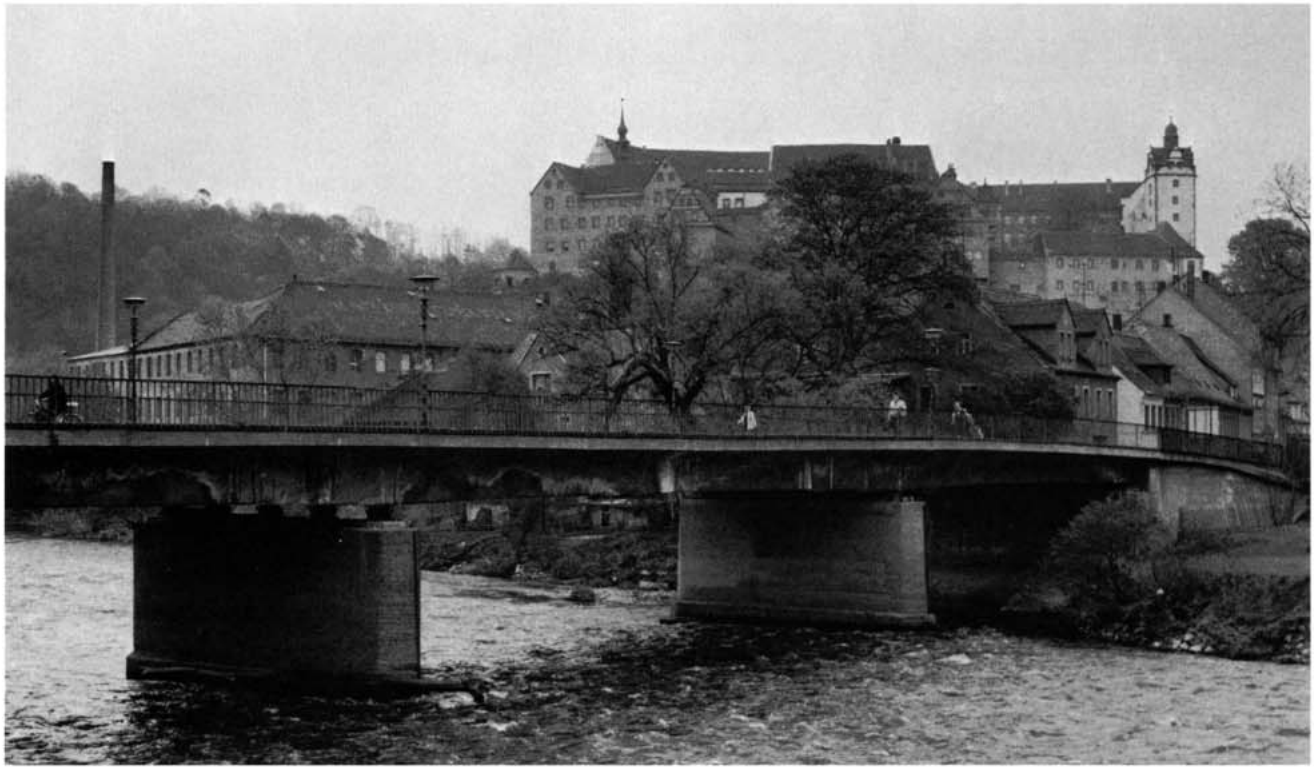


**A flight to freedom of a different sort . . . by glider. The ingenious idea to sail forth having been catapulted from the castle roof and to land on the meadow (*right*) on the far side of the River Mulde was conceived by Flight Lieutenant L. J. E. 'Bill' Goldfinch and Lieutenant Tony Rolt — the famous motor racing driver. It was estimated that the construction of the aircraft using bed boards and cotton palliasse covers would take nearly a year; Flight Lieutenant Jack Best and Captain Dick Howe joined in and the project really got under way in May 1944. The team needed a secure workshop and the attic over the chapel was seen to provide both enough space and be ideally situated for the launch point on the roof ridge above the adjoining French quarters. The attic was long enough for a section to be partitioned off and still not end up too short to pass inspection. *Above:* In the chapel attic today, sawn roof timbers at the west end show where the false wall was constructed, although now the only winged objects are the pigeons who have it all their own way!**

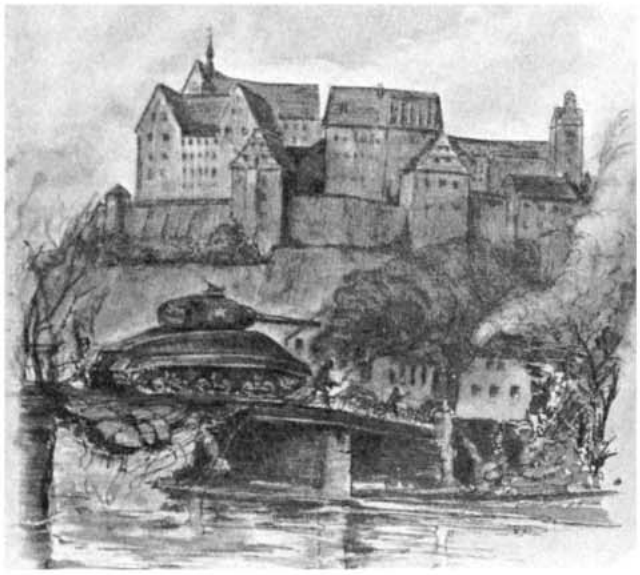
Shortly after Sinclair's death, the Senior British Officer, Lieutenant-Colonel William Tod, announced that it was no longer an adventure to get out of the camp, and anyone escaping would reach home too late to take part in the war. Allied forces were moving across France and the beginning of the end was in sight. Colditz was finally liberated on April 16, 1945 by a task force comprising elements of the 69th Infantry Division and 9th Armored Division, part of the US First Army.



**Although the glider was finished by January 1945, by then the end of the war was in sight and its airworthiness was never put to the test. After the liberation, the glider was taken to the room below the attic where it was assembled and put on display. The only known picture of the glider was taken there by a newspaper correspondent, Lee Carson, who was attached to Colonel Leo Shaughnessy's task force which took Colditz on April 16. Unfortunately the townspeople failed to appreciate the significance of the glider and it was subsequently destroyed. This floor where the machine was displayed has since been divided into three smaller rooms and a corridor making it difficult to take an overall comparison.**



**Colonel Shaughnessy: 'We put artillery in position to shell the city as a prelude to launching an attack in the late afternoon. I was near the OP on the west bank when the early rounds were being zeroed in on the most prominent aiming point across the river. This was one of the towers of a rather large and imposing castle. After several rounds hit the turrets we observed three Allied red, white and blue flags appear at the upper windows of one of the buildings. This thrilling sight was the only signal we needed to know that the castle was the prison where the prisoners-of-war were being held. We moved the fire to other areas of the city and continued the attack. . . . Because of the departure during the night of what we were told was the SS garrison of the city, we had no difficulty moving into Colditz on the morning of the 16th. Obviously the center of interest was the castle and its inhabitants, both Allied and German. . . . When I got to the castle I was amazed and delighted to find the situation so well organised, patently by the Allied prisoners. The German guards were in custody and it was no problem accepting their surrender. . . . The 9th Armored Division commander, General John L. Leonard, visited Colditz Castle on the 16th. He commended my men for their performance while attached to his division. Also on that first day we were visited by American and other Allied war correspondents and photographers. . . . Following the departure of the German guards, the next big event was the evacuation of the Allies. Colonel Johnson and his staff handled this and on the morning of the 18th the convoys to freedom started. It was indeed a happy and meaningful occasion for all of us, especially the liberated, some of whom had been held captive since Dunkirk.' *Above:* From 1945 to 1988 . . . the castle still dominates the landscape.**



**Whereas Johannes Lange recorded the history of Colditz during World War II for the Germans on film, John Watton, talented artist prisoner from the Border Regiment, created memories for the British on paper, like this illustration of the task force crossing the partly-blown bridge. Many of his drawings were sent to England and reproduced in the *Illustrated London News* during the war. He died in November 1988 during our research for this issue — his presence will be sadly missed by all ex-Colditz men.**

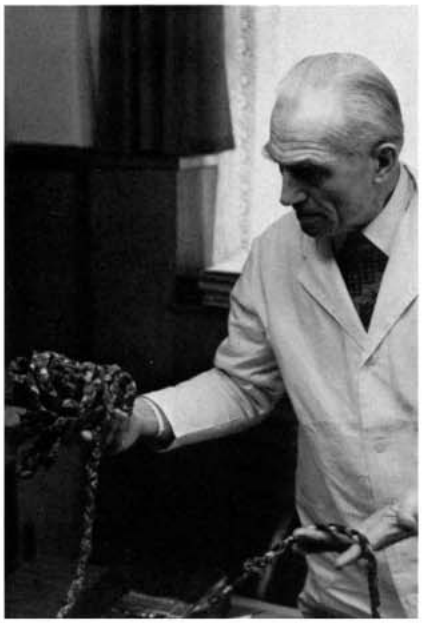
**SHAEF Field Press Censor, 18 April, 1945: 'Colditz Prison Camp captured. Wing Commander Douglas Bader, "legless" RAF ace, smoking pipe, with other RAF officers after their release by the Americans, from the prison camp at Colditz.' From left to right, (standing): Lieutenant Ralph Holroyd, Flight Lieutenant Don Donaldson, Flight Lieutenant Jack Zafouk, Douglas Bader, Warrant Officer Vilem Bufka, Squadron leader G. D. Stephenson, Flight Lieutenant Frank Cigos, Flight Lieutenant Bush Parker, unknown. Kneeling: unknown, Flight Lieutenant Jan Truhlar.**

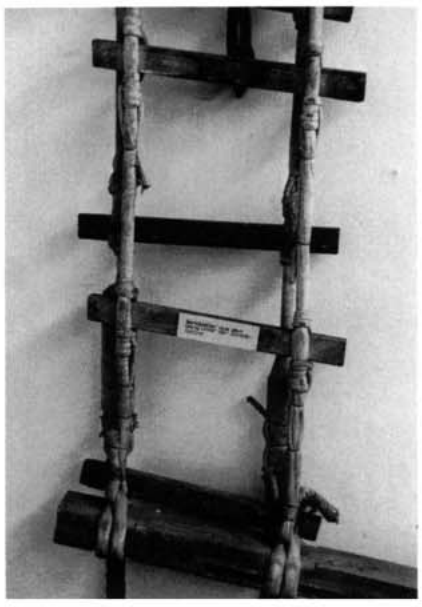
**From roll call . . . to reunion. In the winter of 1942 several hundred prisoners stand on parade in the courtyard.**

**Forty-three years later 24 former prisoners with their wives and guests, returned to East Germany for a nostalgic tour.**

Since then the exploits of the Colditz escapers have been told in book, magazine and film, the first accounts being *Detour* by Lieutenant J. E. R. Wood in 1946 and *Les Indomptables* by General Le Brigant in 1948. Many other former officers have also contributed accounts of their own escapes. Likewise, the German version of events by Reinhold Eggers is invaluable and we appreciate his personal help and advice over a number of years before his untimely death in 1974.

Perhaps most important of all, for us with *After the Battle*, is the fact that the security staff called in the town photographer, Johannes Lange, after each escape, to record not only the scene but, in the unsuccessful attempts, the escapers themselves in their various disguises. This rich legacy of 400 items of evidence, preserved by Eggers in spite of his enforced post-war stay in East Germany, has left us with an unrivalled record of escapology in wartime from one of the most formidable escape challenges of all time.

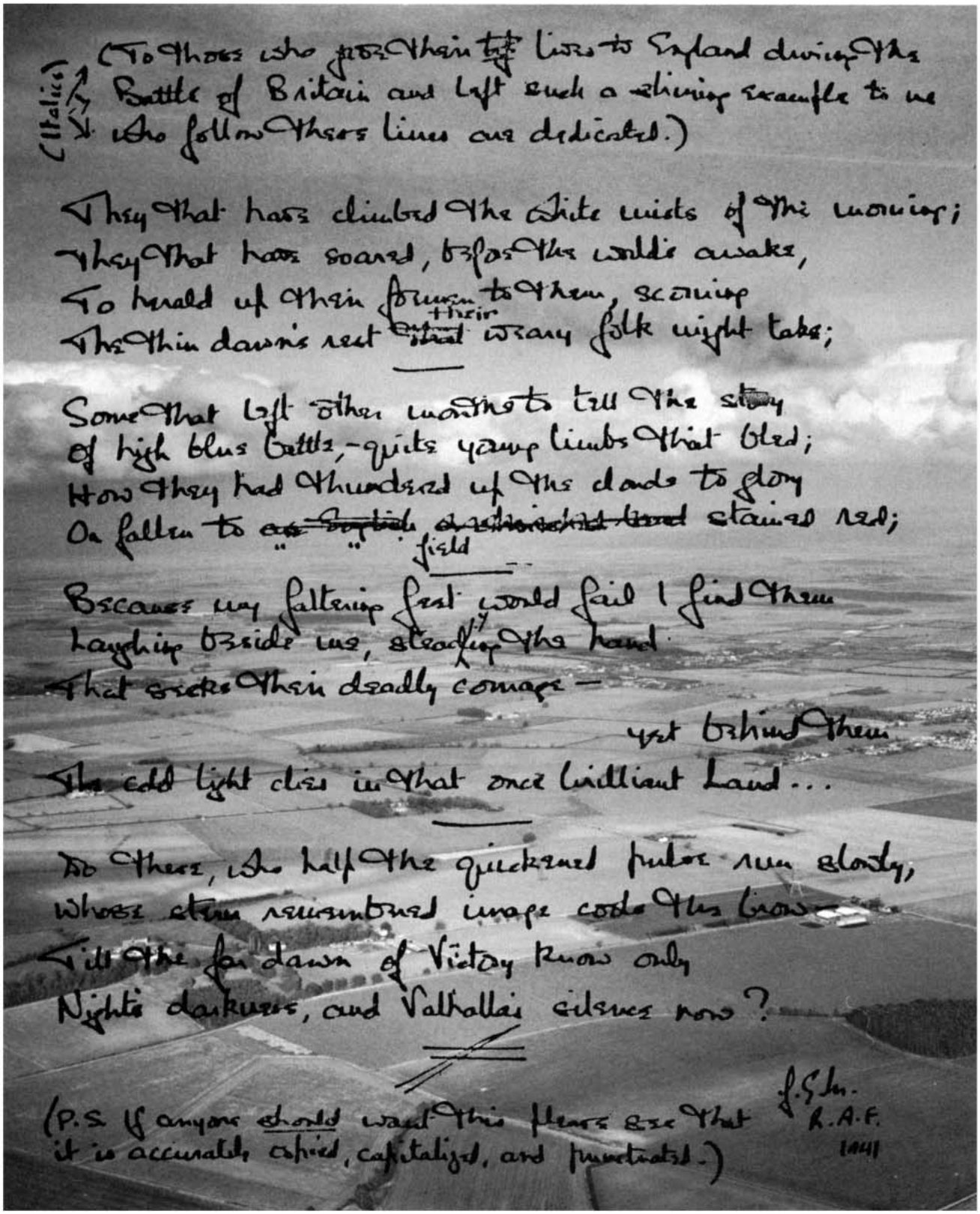




**Many of the exhibits from the wartime museum in the castle are now on display in the town museum but there are hopes to transfer them back to a new location inside the castle some time in the future.** *Left:* **Herr Teichmann with a recently-discovered escape rope.** *Below left:* **One of the ladders from the French tunnel. (Tom Posch)**

**In 1974 the *Radio Times*, as part of their publicity for the BBC Television series *Colditz*, took back to the castle four former inmates. They were Pat Reid, Dick Howe, Sir Rupert Barry and Jack Best. Back at the castle for the first time, Dick Howe led the way up to the secret radio hide. Only he knew its exact location. Entering an attic thick with dust, he removed a floorboard and shone a torch inside. There, frozen in time exactly as it had been left that day in April 1945, was a treasure trove of escape apparatus: saws made from chipped razors; skeleton keys; tools; moulds of all kinds for making badges; an escape kit hidden in a packet of cigarettes; razor blades; forged documents produced on the wooden Colditz typewriter; even a civilian raincoat stolen from a long-forgotten contractor. Today items from the radio hide are now to be found in the unique Booker collection.**

# JOHN GILLESPIE MAGEE


(To those who gave their life's blood to England during the Battle of Britain and left such a shining example to us who follow these lines are dedicated.)
They that have climbed the white mists of the morning;
They that have soared, before the world awake,
To hurl up their fearless challenge to them, scorning
The thin dawn's rest their weary folk might take;
Some that left other mouths to tell the story
Of high blue battle, - quite young limbs that bled;
How they had thundered up the clouds to glory
Or fallen to an English field stained red;
Because my faltering feet would fail I find them
Laughing beside me, steadying the hand
That sticks their deadly courage —
yet behind them
The cold light dies in that once brilliant Land...
To those, who half the quickened pulse now slowly,
Whose stern remembered image code the brow —
Till the far dawn of Victory know only
Night's darkness, and Valhalla's silence now?
(P.S. If anyone should want this please see that it is accurately copied, capitalized, and punctuated.)
J. G. Mc.
R.A.F.
1941

***How they had thundered up the clouds to glory***
***Or fallen to an English field stained red.***

**When surveying the pastoral countryside of Lincolnshire where Pilot Officer John Magee flew operationally, one is drawn to recall his tribute to those of the 'Few' killed in 1940 in his *Per Ardua* — 'through hardship'. This first draft was sent to his parents in the United States in November 1941; four weeks later he was dead yet his all-too-brief career as a poet lives on in the words of his more famous work *'High Flight'*.**

# BY ANDY SAUNDERS

Unlike many of his fighter pilot contemporaries who achieved public acclaim through their 'kill' scores, Pilot Officer J. G. Magee captured attention with his verse *High Flight*. Its fame is worldwide and it has been reproduced in countless publications, used as epitaphs on tombstones, set to music, used by an American TV station as their nightly signing-off piece, quoted, mis-quoted and hung on thousands of walls in homes, flying establishments and churches all around the globe. But what of its author?

Comparatively little has been written about him and therefore comparatively little is known about John Magee by the millions who have read and admired his verse. What has been written or said has often been inaccurate, misleading or embroidered; popular misconceptions being that Magee was a Canadian killed in action during the Battle of Britain and that the poem was found written on a scrap of paper in one of his pockets. None of these facts are correct, but it was undoubtedly President Reagan's poignant quote from *High Flight* following the January 1986 *Challenger* Space Shuttle disaster which focussed considerable international interest on its author. It is intended that this article will serve to set the record straight about who Magee was, how and when the sonnet came to be written and the circumstances of his untimely death.

John Gillespie Magee was born in Shanghai, China, on June 9, 1922, the son of Episcopalian Missionaries, the Rev. John Magee and Faith Backhouse Magee. The Rev. Magee was a citizen of the USA, whilst his wife was British. By virtue of his parentage, therefore, John junior held American citizenship although it later became clear that he considered himself as more of an Englishman than an American. Indeed, after spending his very early years in Nanking, he was sent in 1931 to boarding school in England. At St Clare's School, Walmer, Kent, his teachers prophetically described him as having 'a soaring mind, always aiming at the stars'.

From Walmer, John moved to Rugby School where the young teenager developed a keen interest in literature, particularly in the sphere of poetry. His idol was Rupert Brooke, the renowned poet of the First World War who had himself been a pupil at Rugby. It was whilst at Rugby that John wrote, amongst other poetry, a tribute to his idol; *Sonnet to Rupert Brooke*. Later he won the Rugby Poetry Prize when just sixteen years of age, but it was probably not so much the accolades which went with the prize that pleased John so much as the knowledge that Brooke had won that self-same award.

With the war clouds gathering in 1939, John's father was still in China, but decided to send his son to America where he placed him at Avon School, near Hartford, Connecticut, in preparation for Yale University. From the very outset in America it became clear that John was not happy and he wrote to his mother, then living in England near Dover that, 'I shall never be really happy here — I'm convinced that my place is in England, and if ever I get the opportunity, I'm coming back'. However, whilst in America, John doubtless found solace in his beloved poetry and busied himself in the School Printing Shop, producing a small volume of 17 of his selected poems for private circulation.

***If I should die, think only this of me: That there's some corner of a foreign field That is forever England***

**Rupert Brooke's immortal words were undoubtedly an inspiration to young John attending the same school as his idol, and one can feel his sense of pride and satisfaction in this picture taken in 1938 as he shows his mother the letter informing him that he has won the Rugby School Poetry Prize, which Brooke himself had been awarded 34 years before.**

It was at about this time that John, now rapidly maturing into a young man, began to question his parents devout religious beliefs and started to reject Christianity. This was something which no doubt hurt his parents deeply, but even more heartache and soul-searching must have been caused for them by John's announcement in the summer of 1940 that he wished to reject a top scholarship at Yale in preference for enlistment in the Royal Air Force. As an American citizen John was under no obligation to join up and thus could have safely carried on with a comfortable academic career in the United States. By this time John's father, mother and three younger brothers had arrived to live in America where the Rev. Magee was to take up the position of rector at St John's Church, Lafayette Square, Washington DC, just opposite the White House. Writing later of his son's determination to join up, the Rev. Magee described how he and his wife gave their blessing when they saw how deeply John felt about the situation in England in September 1940.

John Magee's military career was as unremarkable as it was short, but the story of his

SONNET TO RUPERT BROOKE

*We laid him in a cool and shadowed grove*
*One evening, in the dreamy scent of time,*
*Where leaves were green, and whispered high above*
*A grave as humble as it was sublime;*
*There, dreaming in the fading deeps of light —*
*The hands that thrilled to touch a woman's hair;*
*Brown eyes, that loved the Day, and looked on Night,*
*A soul that found at last its answered prayer . . .*
*There daylight, as a dust, slips through the trees,*
*And drifting, gilds the fern about his grave —*
*Where even now, perhaps, the evening breeze*
*Steals shyly past the tomb of him who gave*
*New sight to blinded eyes; who sometimes wept —*
*A short time dearly loved; and after, — slept.*

JOHN GILLESPIE MAGEE

life in the Service is one which, for that period, is all too depressingly familiar in its brevity. However, his aspirations to join the RAF were thwarted from the very outset by the refusal of the American State Department to grant him the necessary paperwork. Undeterred, John decided instead to join the Royal Canadian Air Force and crossed the border from the USA into Canada. Once again, his hopes were dashed upon reaching Ottawa. Here, the selection board told him that he was sixteen pounds underweight, but that he could re-apply in a fortnight. For the next two weeks John embarked upon a binge of prodigious over-eating and studious avoidance of any form of exercise. This apparently did the trick and on October 10, 1940, John was enlisted in the RCAF for aircrew training.

His initial training was with No. 1 ITS (Toronto) before moving on to No. 9 EFTS (St Catherines) and finally No. 2 SFTS (Uplands). It was during this training period that John managed to secure home leave to visit his parents in the USA. Quite likely the very last time he saw his parents was at Christmas 1940 when he apparently re-affirmed his Christian faith by taking Holy Communion at the hands of his father. On June 22, 1941, John was awarded his wings by Group Captain W. A. Curtis prior to embarkation from Halifax for England on July 5.

Arriving in the United Kingdom, Pilot Officer John G. Magee, J.5823, was posted to No. 53 O.T.U. at Llandow for working-up on Spitfires and it was here, on August 7, that he was to make his first flight in a Spitfire I, R6602, for 1 hour 15 minutes. Thereafter, he regularly flew Spitfires, being allocated a variety of airframes to fly, including R6602, L1038, K9817, R6976, X4614 and R7159. Finally, on September 23, he obtained his longed-for operational posting, reporting to No. 412 Squadron, RCAF, then based at Wellingore in Lincolnshire (a satellite of RAF Digby) and flying Spitfire VBs.

Although his time at Wellingore was comparatively short, he undertook a number of operational flights; the first on October 12, 1941 and his second eight days later when he flew a convoy patrol. On November 10 he wrote excitedly to his parents describing how, for the first time, he had been in action on November 8.

**Group Captain Curtis pins the coveted 'wings' on a smiling Pilot Officer John Magee who had successfully completed his flying training with the Royal Canadian Air Force at Uplands in June 1941.**

'I can't tell you much about it but it took place in enemy territory. I was flying in the leading section of four as the C.O.'s wingman. We were jumped and I was the only one to avoid getting hit. The C.O., "Denk", who used to be my Flight Commander, and another pilot, our best Sergeant, were all shot down. I arrived back in England with a couple of Poles at a town about 15 miles South of our home which, by the way, seemed O.K. from the air.

'I had a crack at a Jerry, but didn't see any results so am not claiming it. The Mess has an air of forced cheerfulness just now. Our losses (the first we have sustained) were pretty hard to take but we needed some waking up. Everyone is determined to get something next time.

'The censors are getting very strict and I have told you only what was in the papers. The rest is a long story and must keep until I get home. I was completely terrified throughout but hope not to be so next time.

Much love, John'

Enclosed with this letter was a four-verse poem, *Per Ardua*, which John dedicated to those who died in the Battle of Britain '. . . and left such a shining example to us who follow'. Its style is typically that of John Magee, the pilot poet, but its lines were

**No. 7 Course at 53 OTU at Llandow. Pilot Officer Le Bas, who in 1986 in the correspondence column of *The Daily Telegraph* helped clarify the circumstances in which *High Flight* was written, is with Magee in the third row.**

Front Row Seated (*Left to Right*): Sgt. G. R. Graham, Sgt. F. H. Efford, Sgt. S. W. Pearce, Sgt. F. B. Kaye, Sgt. H. V. Thompson, Sgt. K. Robinson, Sgt. G. Taylor, Sgt. W. B. Randall.
Second Row Seated (*Left to Right*): Sgt. M. L. Smith, F/O. W. A. Read, P/O. Hookway, F/Lt. J. A. Gibson, F/Lt. A. V. Clowes, W/Cdr. E. N. Ryder, D.F.C., Group Captain J. I. T. Jones, D.S.O., M.C., D.F.C., M.M., S/Ldr. R. Drake-Brockman, F/Lt. G. L. Ritcher, F/O. P. J. Stephenson, F/O. J. E. Sulman, P/O. W. B. Orr, Sgt. Woods-Scawen.
Third Row Standing (*Left to Right*): F/Sgt. Forrest, Sgt. Payne, P/O. J. G. Magee, P/O. J. R. Coleman, P/O. R. E. Bush, P/O. L. A. Emmerton, P/O. A. W. Black, P/O. N. J. Smith, P/O. D. R. Edwards, P/O. M. H. Le Bas, P/O. J. M. Fisher, P/O. J. E. Fowler, P/O. R. S. Kingsford, P/O. H. Russell, P/O. K. L. Morrell, Sgt. G. K. Palin, P/O. V. O'Driscoll.
Back Row Standing (*Left to Right*): Sgt. D. A. Court, Sgt. R. W. Hughes, Sgt. T. J. Kenney, Sgt. W. M. Jackson, Sgt. J. L. Tayleur, Sgt. G. W. Sharp, Sgt. D. E. Llewellyn, Sgt. Lerche, Sgt. W. C. Hogg, Sgt. J. A. Roberts, Sgt. D. G. Weekley, Sgt. C. J. Samouelle, Sgt. M. D. Mara, Sgt. A. B. Cleaveland, Sgt. P. S. Moran, Sgt. M. L. Smith, Sgt. T. S. Mathers, Sgt. J. P. MacIlwaine.

John (right) with fellow pilots — unfortunately unidentified.

never destined to become so well known as his other more famous verse.

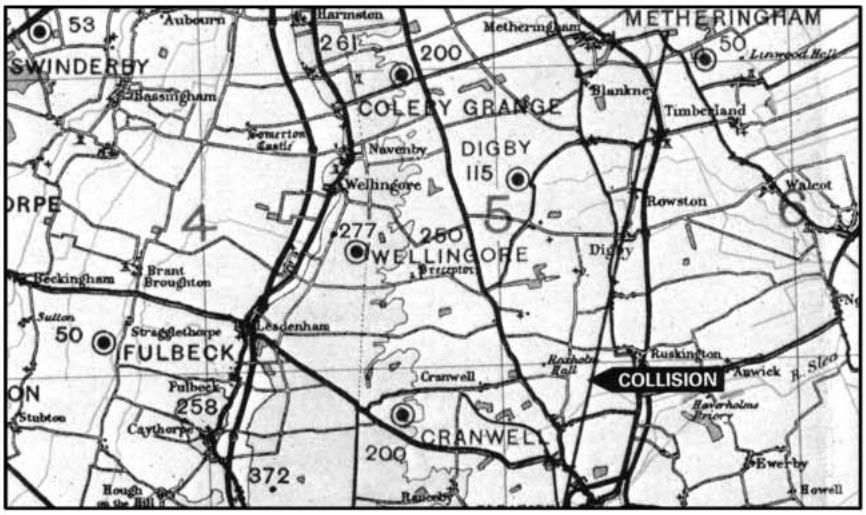
The action which John described and in which he was blooded involved twelve aircraft of 412 Squadron and the casualties he describes were Squadron Leader C. Bushell (the acting CO), Pilot Officer K. R. E. Denkman ('Denk') both posted as missing and Sergeant O. F. Bickell. The action took place north-east of Dunkirk and in his letter to his parents, he talks of landing '15 miles south of home'. 'Home' in this context is taken to mean the family pre-war home in East Kent, rather than his home base of Wellingore. This being the case, then Magee presumably landed at Hawkinge after the operation on November 8.

Operational flying continued for John into December, but after November the excitement of action was not to come again. Apart from a convoy patrol on December 1, his flying from then on consisted of local and practice flying, the monotony broken by a flight as passenger in Whitley SG-T of an OTU on December 5, and two flights in the squadron Magister on the 8th. On the following day John had two nerve-wracking experiences whilst flying Spitfire VZ-D. On the first occasion, whilst on a 'Pipsqueak' interception and high altitude practice dogfight, his log book records 'Learned effect of no oxygen'. Later on the 9th, whilst engaged on night flying, John's airspeed indicator went unserviceable and he had to be escorted in for a formation night landing by Pilot Officer 'Rod' Smith. The following day saw two further flights, logged as 'Searchlight Experiment and Co-op' and later an 'Aircraft Test' when he apparently formated with a Beaufighter and Hudson. His return from this 1 hour and 15 minute flight was destined to be his last safe landing.

Thursday, December 11 dawned a grey, misty, overcast and yet mild winter's day and, despite a ten-tenths cloud base of 1,200 feet, the weather was deemed fit for flying and the aircraft of 412 Squadron readied at dispersal for a squadron formation flight. The Spitfires took off from Wellingore at 10.40 a.m. Senior pilot on this occasion was Flight Lieutenant Archer, the 'A' Flight commander. Pilot Officer Magee, (also in 'A' Flight), flew Spitfire VZ-H, AD291. For almost an hour the flight was uneventful, until just under an hour later when the Spitfires were returning home to Wellingore. As they let down through cloud to the south-east of their airfield they encountered a lone Airspeed Oxford pottering around the circuit of nearby RAF Cranwell. As Magee emerged from the cloud a collision was inevitable. His Spitfire struck the Oxford with what was to be a fatal blow and both aircraft immediately fell out of control.

Meteorological data for that day indicates a mid-morning cloud base of 2,500 feet, but

At the controls of a 412 Squadron machine at Wellingore in Lincolnshire from where he made his last flight on December 11, 1941. John was flying VZ–H at the time; could this be the fatal Spitfire?




Wellingore lay only three miles north-west of Cranwell with the parent station of Digby a similar distance almost due east. Both airfields remain RAF bases: the former the home of the Royal Air Force College and the latter in its non-flying rôle as a listening post for GCHQ — the intelligence-gathering organisation developed from the wartime code-breakers at Bletchley (see *After the Battle* No. 37).

the official accident report states that the collision occurred at 1,400 feet so it may be assumed that the accident took place somewhere around these altitudes. Given that both aircraft then entered a rapid rate of descent and that a certain period had to be allowed for 'thinking time' and time taken in releasing harness straps, R/T and oxygen connections and then in actually abandoning the aircraft, precious little margin for safely

**After warriors of another era invaded Britain in AD 43, they laid down a network of strategic military roads, the one from Londinium to Eboracum (now called York) running almost as straight as a die across the Lincolnshire flatlands. Although much of Ermine Street has since been incorporated in the Great North Road, the present A1 breaks with the former Roman road south of Grantham, leaving the 'Street' at Wellingore still a narrow track. And here, almost 2,000 years later, an enclosure for the flying war horses of a twentieth century army was carved out of land owned by George Overton. Initially the grass aerodrome was used as a relief landing ground for nearby Cranwell and Digby, but since it was handed back to the Overton family in 1951 most of the buildings which John Magee would have known have been demolished.**

**Three miles almost due south lay the busy aerodrome of Cranwell, the location of the RAF College Flying Training School. This view is taken looking almost due east. John Magee returning to Wellingore, let down through cloud virtually in line with the E–W runway (added after the war to cater for jet aircraft), his Spitfire colliding with an Oxford in the circuit.**

On that Thursday morning, 20-year-old Ruth Love was in the garden of the cottage at Roxholm where she lived with her father. Hearing a bang overhead she looked up to see someone falling from the sky with no parachute. In the field beside her home was the hutted encampment of a Royal Artillery search-light unit and the soldiers from the camp ran across the fields towards the spot where the body and wreckage had been seen falling. Although she did not visit the scene herself, the returning soldiers told her that there was no hope for the pilot and that his body had embedded itself in the soft soil. Later, Ruth's father visited the crash scene in the 20-acre field called North Home Hill and retrieved a piece of the aircraft as a souvenir. Taking the relic home, he placed it on a garden wall of his cottage and there it remained for 47 years until our author for this story, Andy Saunders, contacted her whereupon she gladly presented it to him for display in the Tangmere Military Aviation Museum. After the war several fields were combined into one and the electricity pylons added, but this is the spot, currently under investigation by the Lincolnshire Aircraft Recovery Group which holds an MoD licence for its excavation.

**Considerable confusion exists locally over exactly where the Oxford, T1052, in which LAC Aubrey Griffin *(left)* was killed, came down because of a similar collision between another Spitfire and an Oxford which occurred in the same area. Fortunately the local police were far-sighted enough to include a map reference (55/517698) in their report which, although based on the military grid of the period, translates on the Ordnance Survey to this spot — once a pond — close to Roxholm Hall.**

evacuating would be available from an aircraft stricken at such a low altitude. The pilot-under-training and sole occupant of the Oxford, LAC E. A. Griffin, made no attempt to abandon his aircraft and his body was found amongst the smashed wood and fabric remains of his twin-engined aeroplane.

Exactly what happened in John Magee's last moments will never be known for certain. However, we do know that Magee was seen struggling to leave his Spitfire after the collision. When he did get out he was too near the ground to allow his parachute to fully deploy and he fell to his death in a field to the north of Roxholm Hall. Meanwhile, the shaken survivors landed back at Wellingore where Pilot Officer Rod Smith of 'B' Flight was dispatched in Spitfire W3949 at 11.40 a.m. to locate the crash. Pilot Officer Smith had not been part of the formation in which Magee had flown, but was a close friend. He returned to base at 12.15 p.m. having completed his sad task.

Magee's Spitfire had fallen in open farmland and according to the official RCAF report the engine had become detached from the airframe, being found some 400 yards away. The airframe was completely wrecked and burnt, with the port wing 700 yards further on and the wingtip another 300 yards away. The Oxford had plummeted to earth in a paddock just to the east of Roxholm Hall and was completely wrecked, having narrowly missed hitting the Hall itself.

As soon as Rod Smith had landed back at Wellingore, the squadron commander, Squadron Leader Jack Morrison, received Smith's report on the position of the crash and went at once to the Armoury where he collected one of the squadron armourers, Sergeant 'Joe' Cassidy. Writing in February 1988 from his home in Ontario, Cassidy's account does not correspond in all respects with the official report.

'Squadron Leader Morrison came to the Armament Section sometime between 1200 and 1300 hrs and we drove out to the crash site. Magee's body had been removed by the time we arrived. The aircraft was relatively intact when I examined it. It had crashed at an angle of 25 to 30 degrees to the ground and the nose and cannon were embedded in the earth. I could not unload the cannons due to damage but did manage to unload the ·303s. There was absolutely no sign of fire; the engine was intact so also were the wings. The aircraft was about 100 yards from a road with trees in the background. Magee's body was approximately 50 yards from the road. The ground was quite soft and there was quite an indentation where the body had landed. He had been in a foetal position and his hips, shoulders and head with the flying helmet earphones were all clearly defined. The only person I saw in the vicinity was a middle-aged farmer who had apparently witnessed the entire crash. Magee was having difficulty getting out, possibly due to a damaged cockpit canopy. When he did eventually get out there was insufficient height to allow his chute to open.'

Establishing exactly where Magee fell, where his Spitfire crashed and also the impact point of the Oxford, has not been helped by the fact that some days after the incident another collision occurred between a Spitfire of 412 Squadron from Wellingore and an Airspeed Oxford in the same locality. In this accident the Spitfire pilot, a Sergeant Charlesworth, escaped with his life, although the Oxford pilot was killed. Not surprisingly, the two events have become somewhat muddled in the memories of those who recall them. Further confusion was caused in the initial stages of our research by Magee's death certificate which states his death occurred at 'Ruskington Hall'. It has been concluded that the entry must be in error for Roxholm Hall, close to where we know Magee fell. Fortunately, the Lincolnshire Police were able to tell us that their records for the period give the following information:

'At 11.30 hours on 11th December, 1941, an Airspeed Oxford aircraft from RAF Cranwell and a Spitfire attached to RAF Digby came into collision in mid-air and crashed, both pilots being killed and their machines completely destroyed. The Airspeed Oxford fell near Roxholm Hall and the Spitfire into a field about half a mile to the north-east of the Hall.'

The police officer attending the incident was a Sergeant. H. Challand, stationed at nearby Sleaford. Writing in March 1988, Mr Challand described how 'I attended the incident about half an hour after it had happened, by which time Magee's body had been removed, but I remember seeing the impression in the soil where he had fallen. This was about two or three hundred yards to the north of the Hall, and I believe his Spitfire was some distance further on but I did not see this. The Oxford had fallen into a paddock just in front of Roxholm Hall. It was completely smashed up and the body of the unfortunate pilot was still inside.'

**The countryside west of Ruskington seen in 1988. We took the picture at 1,400 feet from the position where the collision occurred.**

| Year 1941 | | Aircraft | | Pilot, or 1st Pilot | 2nd Pilot, Pupil or Passenger | Duty (Including Results and Remarks) | Single-Engine Aircraft | | | | Multi-Engine Aircraft | | | | | | Pass. | Instr./Cloud Flying (Incl. in cols. (1) to (10)) | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | | | Day | | Night | | Day | | | Night | | | | | |
| Month | Date | Type | No. | | | | Dual | Pilot | Dual | Pilot | Dual | 1st Pilot | 2nd Pilot | Dual | 1st Pilot | 2nd Pilot | | Dual | Pilot |
| | | | | | | | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) | (7) | (8) | (9) | (10) | (11) | (12) | (13) |
| — | — | — | — | — | — | — Totals Brought Forward | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Dec | 1 | Spitfire V | H | Self | | Convoy Patrol | | 1:35 | | | | | | | | | | | |
| " | " | " | F | Self | | W.C.2 To Duxford | | 0:45 | | | | 50 Ft. ceiling! | | | | | | | |
| " | " | " | F | Self | | Duxford To W.C.2 | | 0:55 | | | | | | | | | | | |
| " | 6 | Whitley | SG-T | G/L | Self | Local Flying | | ~~0:50~~ | | | | | | | | | 0:10 | | |
| " | 8 | Magister | | Self | F/L Massey | Local Flying | | 0:20 | | | | | | | | | | | |
| " | " | Magister | | Self | | To Colby | | 0:10 | | | | | | | | | | | |
| " | " | Spitfire V | H | Self | | Squadron formation (practise sheep) | | 1:00 | | | | | | | | | | | |
| " | 9 | " | D | Self | | Pipsqueak Interception and high altitude dogfight | | 1:20 | | | | Learned effect of no oxygen | | | | | | | |
| " | " | " | D | Self | | Night Flying | | 1:00 | | | | Airspeed indicator u/s — Brought in (formation) by P/O Smith 1:00 | | | | | | | |
| " | 10 | " | E | Self | | Searchlight experiment + co-op | | 1:40 | | | | | | | | | | | |
| " | " | " | A | Self | | A/C Test (formation — Beaufighter + Hudson) | | 1:15 | | | | | | | | | | | |
| " | 11 | " | H | P/O Magee | | Practice Wing Form | | :50 | Combined | | With Oxford | | | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | Grand Total [Cols. (1) to (10)] 745 Hrs 10 Mins. Totals Carried Forward | | 10 50 | | | | | | | | | | | |

At the anniversary dinner held in March 1988 to mark the 70th year of Digby as an RAF station, Wing Commander C. W. Pratley read an account of the action written by Pilot Officer Smith who had returned to Wellingore as a result of a technical problem. The Operations Record Book does state that 12 aircraft took off but is ambiguous on this point although it does confirm that Smith came back at 11 o'clock and the rest of the squadron 40 minutes later. He then took off on his recce flight to pinpoint the crash at 11.40 a.m., returning at 12.15. If a pilot is killed or fails to return, it is the sad duty of the commanding officer to complete the last entry in the dead pilot's log book. Here Squadron Leader Morrison has added John Magee's fatal 50-minute flight.

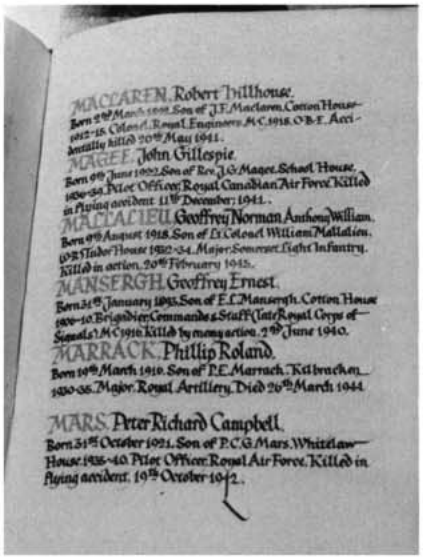
ORDERS: 'No. 412 Squadron — Funeral of Pilot Officer J. G. Magee. The funeral will take place at 14.30 hours on Saturday 13th December 1941, at Scopwick Parish Church. Personnel of the Escort and Bearer parties, and Squadron representatives are to assemble at 12.45 hours at Wellingore Hall. Personnel of the firing party and the trumpeters, and personnel of the attending party from Station Headquarters, and 609 and 92 Squadrons will assemble at the Main Guard Room, Digby, at 13.30 hours. Transport will be available to carry personnel to Scopwick where they will form up at the crossroads at 14.15 hours. The tender carrying the coffin will leave the mortuary, Station Sick Quarters, at 14.00 hours, preceded by the Padre'.

**In a letter written from the United States to his parents in Britain, John described how he felt that his 'place was in England and if I ever get the opportunity I'm coming back'. Now John Magee's place is forever in England where he lies in Grave 33 of Row 3 of Scopwick Burial Ground.**

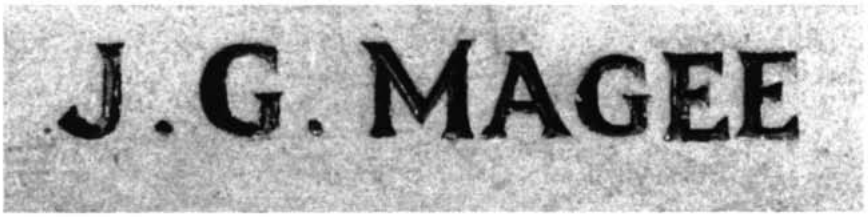
Magee was laid to rest with full military honours at Scopwick Burial Ground on Saturday, December 13, following a service at 2.30 p.m. held in Scopwick Parish Church conducted by a RCAF chaplain, Squadron Leader S. K. Belton and the parish vicar, the Rev. Lewis E. Barker. An escort and bearer party comprising 45 officers and airmen of 412 Squadron were in attendance, led by the CO, Squadron Leader J. D. Morrison. Also present were all the aircrew of 412 Squadron and representatives from station headquarters and the other squadrons of the Digby Wing; namely 92, 409, and 609. As if the attendance at their friends funeral were not salutary experience enough, the pilots of 412 Squadron were ordered to attend a lecture and film show that evening by Group Captain A. P. Campbell, RCAF, of the Flight Safety Branch, the title of the film being *Caution in Flying*!

At the time of his death, Magee's *High Flight* had not yet achieved the universal acclaim which was destined for it and its author. However, it would seem that amongst John's correspondence home to his parents he had included the verses of the sonnet and shortly after his death the Rev. Magee published the lines in the issue of St John's magazine published on December 21. It caught the attention of a reporter from a Washington newspaper which subsequently published it, thereby setting in motion the train of events which were to secure its immortality. Within a short space of time, *High Flight* had appeared in newspapers in Britain, and was included in *The Daily Telegraph Third Miscellany* (August 1942), *More Poems for The Forces* (1943) and *Twentieth Century Verse* (Clarke, Irwin and Co. Ltd, Toronto, 1945) amongst others. In Dallas, Texas, Dr Lloyd Pfautsch, an eminent composer and conductor of chorale music of the period even set *High Flight* to a musical accompaniment.

On January 14, 1942, the Royal Canadian Air Force issued an official news release which announced that 'Pilot Officer John Gillespie Magee, Jr., an American citizen born of missionary parents in Shanghai and educated at Britain's famed Rugby School, was killed on active service in Britain last December 11th. He was 19 years old and had the cause of freedom in his heart. Pilot Officer Magee had poetry in his heart, too, and in the form of a sonnet he left a message




**At Rugby School, the Book of Remembrance in the Chapel, and his name inscribed in stone nearby, recall his pre-war days in School House.**



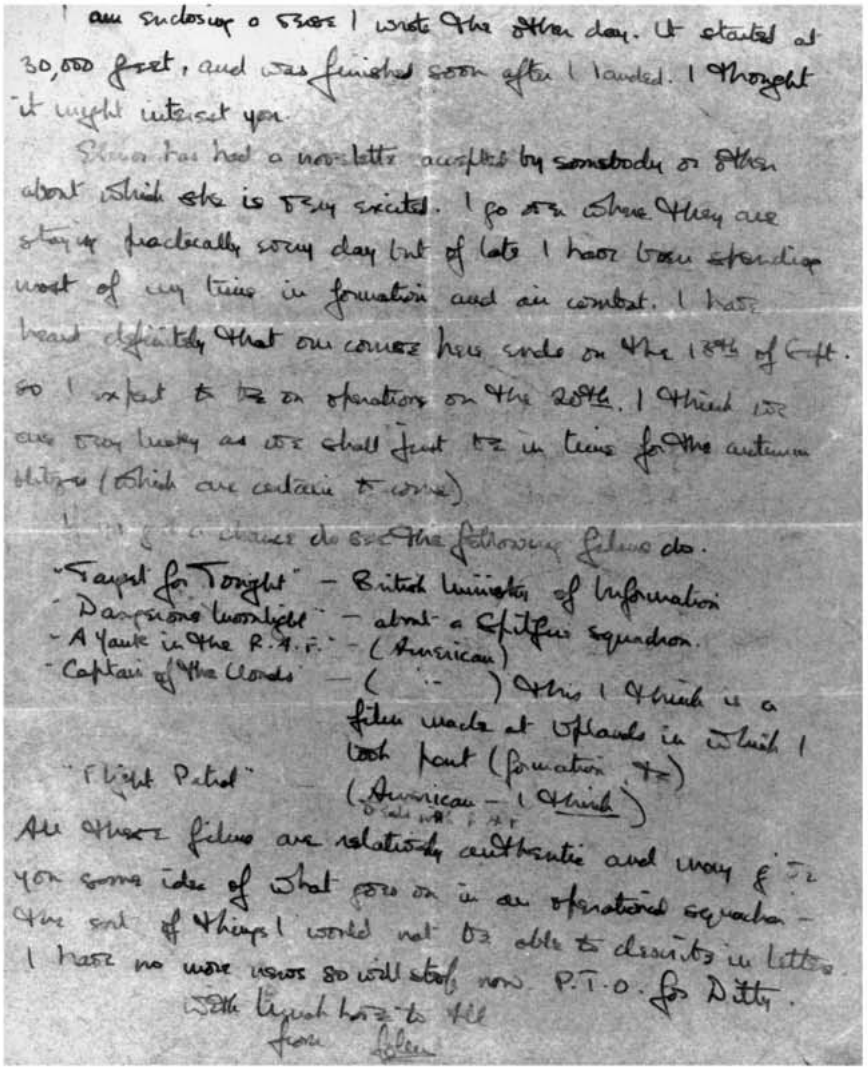
to youth which his parents consider may be greater than anything he had done in the way of fighting.'

After learning of his son's death, Mr Magee wrote to the RCAF: 'When my wife and I saw how deeply he felt about the situation in September 1940, we gave our consent and blessing to him as he left to enter the R.C.A.F. We felt as deeply as he did and were proud of his determination and spirit. We knew that such news might come. When his sonnet reached us we felt then that it had a message for American youth but did not know how to get it before them. Now his death has emblazoned it across the entire country. We are thinking that this may have been a greater contribution than anything he may have done in the way of fighting, for surely our American youth must enter this conflict in the spirit of idealism and faith. May we thank the R.C.A.F. for all the training and help you gave our boy. We saw a tremendous change in him when he returned to us from his training, a change that was all for the good. We do not regret that we gave our consent to his going and will forever be proud of him.'

The popular and oft-quoted version of how *High Flight* was written (i.e. on the back of an envelope) is the one recalled by Michael Le Bas, a wartime colleague of John Magee whilst they were at 53 OTU together, and now Air Vice-Marshal Le Bas. Writing in 1986, Air Vice-Marshal Le Bas related that 'during our acquaintanceship he had always maintained that his first love was poetry, although he had discovered that flying was not far behind. He was thus able to imbue his flying with a sense of lyricism. I happened to run into him shortly after his first flight in a Spitfire, about which he was waxing lyrical. I urged him, though not very seriously, that he should put his feelings down in words. He thereupon sat down in the mess and composed, in a very short time, the first draft of *High Flight* written, literally, on the back of an envelope. I must have been the first person to read it, but cannot claim that I foresaw its eventual fame. I was surprised to learn some years later that his original manuscript had been placed in the Library of Congress, Washington. In retrospect, I should not have been surprised about that.'

It would indeed be nice to think that Magee was inspired to write *High Flight* immediately after his first flight in a Spitfire as Le Bas suggests. However, we know that this took place on August 7, 1941, and the document preserved in the Rare Manuscripts section of the Library of Congress, Washington, is dated September 3, 1941, and according to Mr Royal D. Frey, Chief of the Research Division, US Air Force Museum, it is 'written on a piece of standard writing paper'. Possibly the first draft *was* written on an envelope as Le Bas recalls on or about August 7 and then later transferred onto notepaper by Magee; this being the document now preserved. If this is the case then the now famous envelope apparently no longer exists. As to the other part of the legend which relates how the sonnet was first discovered in one of Magee's pockets after his death, we now know that, in fact, it had already been sent to his parents prior to his being killed. However, there may well be some truth in the story that the poem was found on his body. Mrs Anne Price, daughter of the late Charles Bontoft, farmer at Roxholm Hall, recalled in 1988 how her father had always recounted the tale that he had found the poem 'hanging round Magee's neck', although how and on what it was inscribed is by no means clear.

When Magee's verse was first published in Great Britain, it caught the attention of the parents of Ernest Aubrey Griffin, Ernest and Mary, at their home in Headington, Oxford. A footnote to the verse described how



**The earliest known manuscript of *High Flight* is that now preserved in the Library of Congress in Washington, written on the back of a letter dated September 3, 1941. As John mentions that 'I wrote [it] the other day . . . at 30,000 feet . . . and finished [it] soon after I landed', we can safely say that it must have been composed over the skies of South Wales as he was stationed at Llandow in August 1941. His parents donated the letter to the Library on April 14, 1943; unfortunately, for such an august body, the poem side *(opposite)* is now disfigured by a crude accession stamp and inscription. (An anthology of all John Magee's poetry entitled *John Magee: The Pilot Poet* is available from This England, PO Box 52, Cheltenham, Glos. GL50 1YQ.)**

Magee had been killed on active service in Britain on December 11, 1941. Ernest and Mary immediately recognised that this was the same date of death as their son's and, although the exact circumstances of the accident were never communicated to the parents, they had learnt that their son had been killed in a mid-air collision with another pilot who had also died. The Air Ministry refused to confirm to Mr & Mrs Griffin that Magee had been involved in the collision with their son, but undeterred, they managed to make contact with Mr & Mrs Magee, with whom they entered into a friendly and lengthy correspondence. Eventually, in April 1942, at the suggestion of Faith Magee, Mr Griffin wrote to the CO of 412 Squadron at Wellingore seeking confirmation of the facts. On April 8, the squadron adjutant replied to the Griffins confirming that indeed both men had died in the same accident. During our research for this article we were surprised to discover that Mr Griffin's original letter and the reply from 412 Squadron still existed in the archives of the Directorate of History, National Defence Headquarters, Ottawa, and were delighted to pass copies of this correspondence from the past to surviving members of the Griffin family.

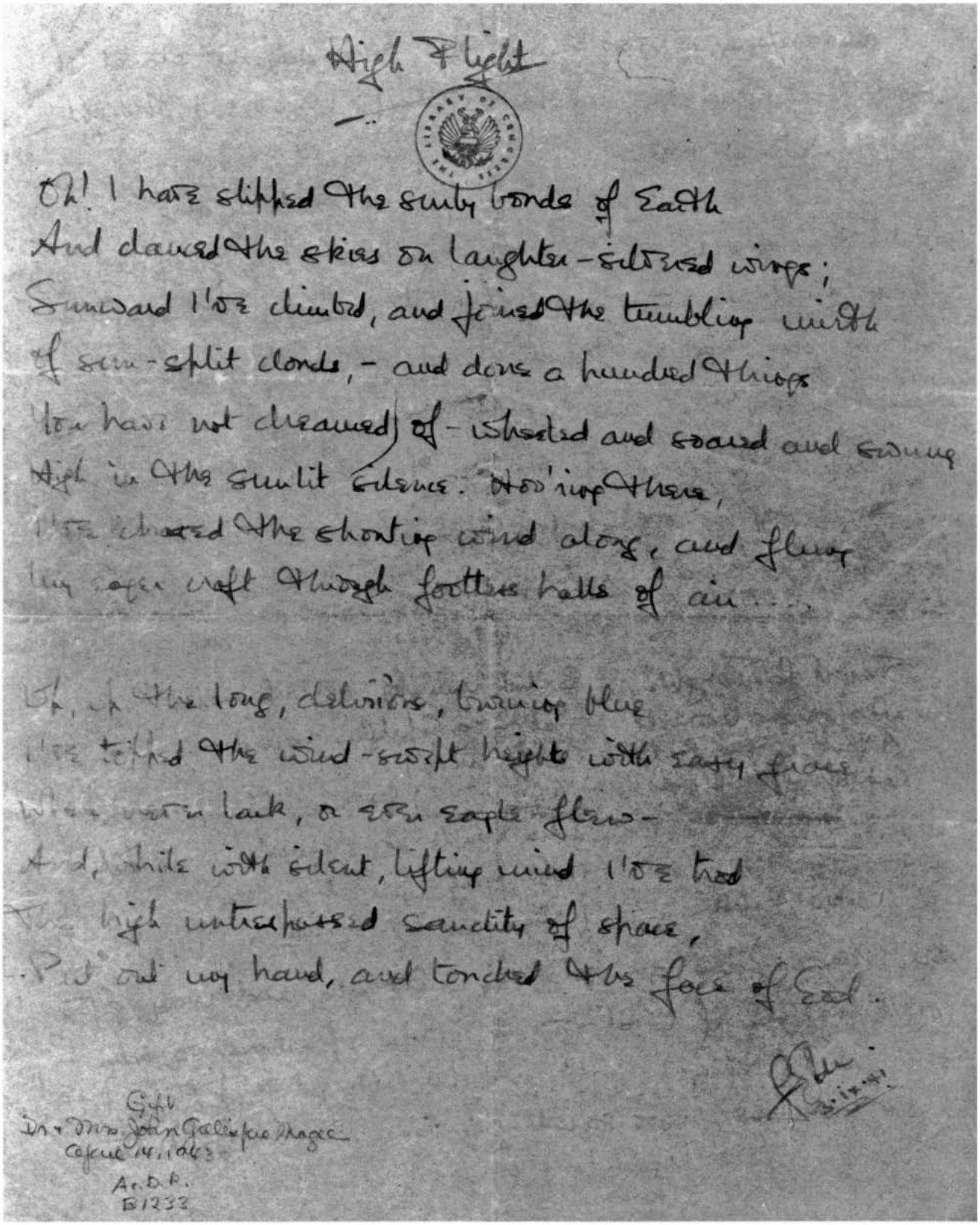
Like Magee, Griffin was just 19 years old at the time of his tragic death. He was educated at St Andrew's School, Headington, before attending the Oxford School of Technology, where he sat a commercial course in book-keeping, shorthand and typing prior to going to work at the city engineers' office in Oxford Town Hall. Just like Magee, young Aubrey was clearly a book-loving, scholarly type and, again like Magee, Aubrey was anxious to join up and become a pilot. When, on his 18th birthday, his call-up papers had not arrived he hitch-hiked to Ruislip to make enquiries. Eventually, he was enlisted as an LAC trainee pilot to be posted to RAF Cranwell for flying training.

The RAF College at Cranwell had closed as a cadet college on the outbreak of hostilities and reformed immediately as a Flying Training School known as the Royal Air Force College Service Flying Training School, where all ranks were taught to fly. It was here that LAC Griffin joined No. 32 Course, and, at the time of his death, he was only days away from passing out as a fully-fledged pilot. However instead of a 'Wings' parade for LAC Griffin, the last formality afforded the young airman at RAF Cranwell

was an inquest held in the sick quarters by Deputy Lincolnshire Coroner, Hubert Pym, on December 12 and 16. Returning a verdict of accidental death, Pym released the remains for cremation at Oxford, where Griffin's name was recorded on the left-hand column of names of war dead at Oxford Crematorium.

The Magees remained in contact with the Griffin family and in 1944 Faith Magee presented them with a copy of the newly published biography of John, *Sunward I've Climbed*, by Hermann Hagedorn and published by Macmillan, New York. Inside the front cover Faith had written a simple message: 'Presented to Mr & Mrs Griffin, to whom we are closely linked in a common sorrow, but also in a sure and certain hope. Faith and John Magee, Washington DC, September 1944.'

Cruel fate had taken the lives of two young men in the most tragic of circumstances. We can but speculate on what might have been had Aubrey Griffin been allowed to live a life to full maturity. As for Magee, Joe Cassidy the former fitter/armourer, on 412 Squadron, must be echoing the thoughts of many when writing that 'the world lost a budding genius the day John died'. Fortunately for us *High Flight* lives on. Doubtless Magee would have been pleased to think it could be dedicated to all fellow airmen who had 'put out their hand and touched the face of God' . . . men like Aubrey Griffin and, forty-five years later, the *Challenger* astronauts.


High Flight
Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of Earth
And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings;
Sunward I've climbed, and joined the tumbling mirth
of sun-split clouds, - and done a hundred things
You have not dreamed of - wheeled and soared and swung
High in the sunlit silence. Hov'ring there,
I've chased the shouting wind along, and flung
my eager craft through footless halls of air. . . .
Up, up the long, delirious, burning blue
I've topped the wind-swept heights with easy grace
Where never lark, or even eagle flew -
And, while with silent, lifting mind I've trod
The high untrespassed sanctity of space,
Put out my hand, and touched the face of God.
Gift
Dr + Mrs John Gillespie Magee
Copied 14.1.43
A.D.A.
B1233

# HIGH FLIGHT

# OH! I HAVE SLIPPED THE SURLY BONDS OF EARTH

and danced the skies
on laughter-silvered wings;
Sunward I've climbed, and joined the tumbling mirth
Of sun-split clouds – and done a hundred things
You have not dreamed of – wheeled and soared and swung
High in the sunlit silence. Hov'ring there
I've chased the shouting wind along, and flung
My eager craft through footless halls of air.
Up, up the long delirious, burning blue,
I've topped the windswept heights with easy grace
Where never lark or even eagle flew –
And while with silent lifting mind I've trod
The high untrespassed sanctity of space,
Put out my hand and touched

## THE FACE OF GOD

High Flight by Pilot Officer Gillespie Magee Junior
No. 412 Squadron RCAF, killed on December 11, 1941.

Raymond L D Avery